

THE MYSTERY OF LYNNE COURT

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By

J. S. FLETCHER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

LEE THAYER

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THE MYSTERY OF LYNNE COURT

INTRODUCTION

At this late date, Mr. Fletcher hardly needs an introduction to any English speaking country. Here, in America, we already have many of his entertaining mystery stories, of which, perhaps, this volume is the best.

His stories of English rural life are not so well known to us, but are well worth reading. Their charm of description and character study is not lacking in his mystery stories, which will always be found to have much to recommend them besides their thrills and intricacies.

To those of us who love to read (and write) these tales of plot and counterplot, there is no greater pleasure than to find one which not only "keeps us on our toes" from start to finish, but one which is written in clear, good English, vitalizing both narrative and description.

With this modest tribute of one fellow-craftsman to another, I make my bow, and present for your delectation, ladies and gentlemen—

MR. J. S. FLETCHER

in

THE MYSTERY OF LYNNE COURT.

LEE THAYER.

Chatham, New Jersey,
July 23, 1923.

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CHAPTER I

THE TWO O'CLOCK CALL

FOR once in a way something had gone wrong with Hextall's latch-key—or with the latch into which he was endeavoring to insert it. A young man of infinite and practised patience, he spent five minutes in trying to make things right; it was already two o'clock in the morning and he had no wish to ring the bell and wake his household. And as he stood there on the steps of his house, occasionally glancing right and left along the lights and shadows of Wimpole Street, it struck him as a queer thing that this should happen on the first night out that he had allowed himself for the past six months. Some folk might say that inability to fit a key into a latch was a not unusual result of a night out, but no one who knew Hextall would have connected this difficulty with his amusements. His relaxation, in fact, had taken the form of a visit to the annual dinner of a learned society to which he belonged; that over, he had gone home for a pipe and a chat with an old fellow-student, and had sat up discussing a certain new theory until the small hours. He was now very tired, and very sleepy, and he felt inclined to curse the patentee of that particular latch—an American affair which had only recently been fitted to the door. When a neighbouring church clock struck two he gave

the attempts up and rang the bell, and at that moment a man came running, panting, round the corner.

Hextall's was a corner house, and at the corner itself stood a gas-lamp. In its yellow light Hextall looked curiously at the man who ran and panted. He was a big man, in evening dress; his face was very large, and very fat, and at that instant it shone white, as if from fear or emotion. The man wore no hat; on his high, bald forehead Hextall saw great beads of perspiration gathering and rolling. Unconsciously, the runner lifted a plump hand and wiped them away, muttering to himself as he did so. Then he suddenly caught sight of Hextall, half hidden in the shadow of his door, and he pulled up with a quick, shaking jerk of his body. He glanced sharply at Hextall's tall figure, gave an equally quick glance at the house, and approached. And Hextall, who had a trick of shrewd observation, set him down as a butler or confidential valet; the signs of it were written all over his big, flabby face.

"Beg your pardon, sir," gasped the man. "Are you a doctor?"

"I am," answered Hextall.

"Can you come with me, sir?—close by. I—I was running for a doctor. At once, if you please, sir!"

"Were you going for any particular doctor?—have you a doctor whom you usually call in?" asked Hextall.

"No, sir—never had occasion before now," replied the man. "Glad if you'd come back with me, sir, at

once. It's just round the corner—one of the new flats in Queen Anne Street—Mr. Tress's, sir."

"I'm coming—as soon as my servants open the door," said Hextall, quietly. "In the meantime, what's the matter?"

The man glanced nervously up and down the deserted street, as if he feared to even whisper to its lights and shadows. He wiped his forehead again as he drew nearer to the young doctor.

"Accident, sir—shooting—revolver went off," he replied, in low tones. "And—and it's a lady."

"A lady?" replied Hextall.

"Mr. Tress's sister, sir. A young lady."

The door opened just then, and Hextall motioned the man to follow him inside. He went straight along the hall to his surgery, turned on a light, and, picking up a bag which was kept ready in case of emergencies, opened it, and glanced at its contents. The messenger stood watching him and getting his breath.

"Where is this young lady wounded?" asked Hextall, mechanically.

"I—I think it's in the shoulder, sir—I'm not sure. There or in her arm, sir, anyway," answered the man. "I wasn't present, of course."

"Who's with her?" demanded Hextall.

"There's her brother, Mr. Tress, sir," replied the other, a little confusedly. "And—and some other gentleman."

"No woman?"

"No woman, sir."

Hextall picked up the bag, into which he had placed some extra necessities.

"Oh, well!—we can get a nurse within five minutes," he said. "Come along, then."

The man followed him out of the house with a sigh of obvious relief, and once in the quiet street again wiped his forehead.

"Upset me, sir," he said, apologetically. "A shock, sir!"

"You'd better tell me how it came about," remarked Hextall. "I dare say you're pretty well aware that you can tell a medical man anything."

"I don't know how it came about, sir," answered the man. "All I know is—it did come about. I haven't been long with Mr. Tress—a few months—and I don't know much about them. You see, he's a very rich young gentleman, with a fine place in Survey—Lynne Court—and a couple of months since he took and furnished this flat. He—well, the truth is, he's gone the pace a bit, sir. And to-night, his sister, Miss Paquita——"

"Paquita?" said Hextall, involuntarily.

"They're half foreigners, sir" said the man. "Half Spanish, I think. She came up from Lynne Court last evening, and said she was going to stop. I don't think Mr. Tress half liked it, but he took her out to dinner and to the theatre, and when they came back, two or three of his friends dropped in—as they often do, late at night. Miss Paquita, she went to bed—half-past twelve that was: I had to stop up, of course. And I was dozing, just before two o'clock,

in my pantry, when I heard a shot. Then Mr. Kesteven—that's Mr. Tress's great friend, sir, came to me, and said there'd been an accident, and Miss Tress had shot herself, and sent me for a doctor."

"Shot herself, eh?" said Hextall.

"So he said, sir—but not dangerously. Here we are, sir."

He had led Hextall round the corner to a block of newly-erected flats, and he now hurried him past a night-porter, with a meaning look at that functionary, and up one flight of stairs to a door at which he paused for a moment. He gave his companion an informing glance.

"They're all a bit—you know, sir," he said. "The gentleman, I mean—they'd all been taking a fair lot. Except Mr. Kesteven. He's never like that. But this may have sobered them."

Hextall nodded silently, and followed his guide into a dimly-lighted, richly-furnished entrance hall, in the oak panelling of which several doors were set. The man threw one of them, at that moment a little ajar, wide open, and the doctor stepped into a blaze of light and upon a scene which at any other time would have impressed him by its semi-theatrical atmosphere. Indeed, if a curtain had been suddenly rolled up before his eyes to reveal what he saw, he would have said that this was a scene set for the stage. Except, that is, for one difference—his keen, professional eye immediately caught sight of red blood trickling over warm, white flesh.

He stood for a second staring at what he confronted: behind him, his guide muttered low words of consternation. Between them and the rest of the room, a finely proportioned, handsomely decorated and furnished apartment, half lighted by the glow of tinted lamps, stood a girl, who gripped the side of a tall cabinet with one hand, and in the other held a revolver in an unpleasantly threatening fashion.

She was apparently eighteen or twenty years of age, very beautiful in a dazzling, un-English fashion, and at that moment very striking because of her pallor, which was accentuated by her dark hair, piled in heavy masses about a graceful head. Somewhat above the middle height, slender and lithe of figure, she was in evening dress, and it was from the bare arm which gripped the cabinet that the red blood was trickling. As Hextall entered she flashed a quick glance upon him from a pair of dark eyes just then blazing with anger; it swept him over in a second, and darted back to four men who sat or stood on the other side of the room, behind a green-covered table on which lay certain cards and implements which showed that somebody had suddenly interrupted the playing of a well-known game of chance.

Hextall's quick eyes followed the girl's. Immediately before her, standing by the card-table, watching her every movement, stood a tall, clean-shaven, keen-faced man, alert, ready, whose attention visibly relaxed as Hextall entered. He was a man of good looks, obviously astute and clever, and as he was just as obviously sober, and in very full possession of his

wits, Hextall took him to be the Mr. Kesteven of whom the valet had spoken. His eye travelled past him to the hearth, where a younger man, whom from the resemblance between them Hextall at once set down as the girl's brother, sat sprawling in an easy chair, his legs thrust stiffly out before him, his hands plunged deeply in his trousers pockets. His chin was sunk on his breast; his mouth gaped a little; his eyes, heavy and dull, were fixed on the girl as if the muddled brain behind them was endeavouring to realize and comprehend what was taking place. A half-burned cigar lay on the rug at this young man's feet; on his broad, shining shirt-front there were wine stains. And in the silence which hung all over the room he suddenly closed his eyes and began to snore.

There were two other occupants of the room— youngish men in evening dress who stood in the background, close together, whispering. Hextall set them down at once as foreigners, though he was uncertain of their nationality. One was evidently expostulating or persuading; the other was as obviously listening with an ill grace. He was a dark-skinned, sinister-eyed fellow this, and he glared over his shoulder at the girl as if he were labouring under some injury. And Hextall realized that it was this man whom the girl was chiefly watching.

All this was seen by the doctor and the valet within a second of their entering the room. Hextall sized up the situation in a glance. Without hesita-

tion he walked straight to the girl and held out his hand.

"Give me that revolver, and then let me see your wound," he said, peremptorily.

Paquita Tress stared at this sudden cold-voiced command. For an instant she looked Hextall up and down; then a frown of annoyance settled between her eyebrows, and she shifted her position a little.

"Not until those men hand back the money they have got out of my brother!" she answered determinedly. "That man across there, particularly—he's a cheat!"

The tall man leaning against the table turned his head and said something in a murmur to the man who was scowling in the rear. Then he stepped forward, smiling a little.

"There has been a slight—slight contretemps," he said, deprecatingly, as he nodded to Hextall. "Miss Tress got the idea that unfair play was taking place between her brother and his guests, and she interfered, I am sorry to say, with threats of violence. For her own sake, I endeavored to take her revolver from her, and in the struggle it went off, and I'm afraid she has a wound."

"And the revolver, too," said the girl, with a defiant laugh. "And I'll keep my word! Don't pay any attention to him," she went on, turning for the instant to Hextall, and indicating the tall man with a contemptuous sneer; "he's as bad as the others—worse! That man behind there doesn't go out of here until he puts that money back on the table—I watched him.

If any of you—any!—dare to touch me again, I'll shoot you dead!"

The tall man looked at the doctor, smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned away and moved a step or two towards the men in the background, and Hextall once more approached the girl.

"You had much better take my advice," he said, quietly. "You are doing no good, and your wound may be more serious than you think."

"I know all about my wound," she retorted. "I've got a bullet in my shoulder, if you want to know. But what I've said, I've said, and I shall do what I threatened if——Look there!" she suddenly burst out, pointing to the figure in the arm-chair. "Do you think he was fit to play? They've cheated him—all of them!"

The tall man came back, followed by the others—the sinister-eyed one in an evident temper.

"Miss Tress exaggerates," said the tall man, calmly. "There has been no cheating. But for the sake of peace and quietness this gentleman will put down on the table what he won from Mr. Tress. We others won nothing—we lost. Hand it over and let us be done with this," he went on, turning to the angry man. "Be quick!"

The man addressed growled and scowled, but he suddenly dived a hand into his pocket, drew it out full of notes and gold, flung them on the table and turned to the door with a muttered curse. His companion followed him; in silence the valet crossed the

hall in advance, helped them to their hats and overcoats, and let them out of the flat. A dead silence fell on the room, interrupted by the younger man's snores.

"Now give me that revolver," said Hextall. "Come!"

For answer Paquita Tress suddenly let the revolver drop on the floor, and sank, fainting, after it.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVIL INCARNATE

NEARLY two hours later, Hextall, followed by a fellow medical man whose services he had requisitioned, emerged from the bedroom in which he had left his patient in charge of two professional nurses, summoned from a neighbouring home, and turned into the apartment to which the valet had conducted him on his arrival. It now looked vastly different. The tinted lamps no longer cast a pink and violet glow over its appointments; the windows were set wide open, and the first gleam of the spring daybreak was mingling with a welcome breath of fresh, morning air. The green card-table and its suggestive furnishings were gone; gone, too, was a certain plentiful array of bottles and decanters which had stood on a sideboard; the whole room appeared to have been cleansed and sweetened of all signs of riotousness, and now looked highly respectable and sober. And at a little table in one of the windows, shaved, bathed, scrupulously groomed, a smart tweed suit on his well-set up figure, a fresh flower in his buttonhole, sat Mr. Kesteven, munching a roll and sipping fragrant coffee. Whatever orgy might have been in process earlier that morning, it was evident to the two doctors that this clear-eyed, steady-handed, alert gentleman had taken no other than a spectator's part in it.

Kesteven, who was reading a newspaper of the previous evening, jumped up from his easy-chair at sight of the doctors and came forward with the calmness and assurance of a man who was very much at home. He nodded with a mixture of politeness and familiarity which did not particularly recommend itself to Hextall.

"Well, doctor?" he said. "I hope you have left your patient all right? Not a really serious wound, I gather?"

"The injury is not serious," answered Hextall. "But Miss Tress must be kept perfectly quiet until she can be moved home."

"Oh!" said Kesteven, off-handedly. "She'll be quiet enough here. The two nurses, of course, will take entire charge of her."

"She must be kept quiet at night," observed Hextall.

"Of course! You're thinking of—what you saw this morning," said Kesteven, with a smile. "Pity that Miss Tress got so excited about what was really nothing. Her brother was not being cheated—I would have stopped that. Dash of South American blood, you know, doctor!—hot, impulsive, excitable."

"From what I saw of him," remarked Hextall, dryly, "Mr. Tress was not in a condition to——"

"To prevent himself being fleeced, eh?" broke in Kesteven, with a smile that was not far off being a sneer. "All right—all right!—but he'd only just crumpled up when you came—he was quite capable of taking care of himself until then. And I was

there—and I only drink at meals, and not very much then. Miss Tress laboured under a mistaken impression—and it was her own fault that she got her wound. If I had not tried to take that revolver from her you'd have been fetched to a dead man instead of to a slightly wounded woman.”

Hextall made no answer. He was uncertain of Kesteven's status in the place. But Kesteven speedily solved his doubts on that subject.

“I'm sharing this flat with Tress, at present,” he went on. “You can rely on me to see that Miss Tress is kept perfectly quiet until she can go down to Lynne Court. Now, how soon will that be?”

“In a few days—if all goes on properly,” replied Hextall. “Absolute quiet is the necessary thing.”

“This flat shall be kept quiet as a woodland cottage,” said Kesteven. “In fact, the patient and her nurses shall have it all to themselves. I'll cart Tress off for a few days. Rely on me. Now, let me offer you some coffee?”

Hextall declined and went away with his colleague. In the hall outside they met the valet, who looked at Hextall with a mute question.

“There is nothing very seriously wrong,” said Hextall. “Miss Tress will do very well if she is kept quiet. I have impressed that upon Mr. Kesteven, and he has promised to see to it. I understand that he shares this flat with Mr. Tress.”

The valet made a grimace. He glanced at the door of the room in which the doctors had left Kesteven over his coffee.

"Shares!" he muttered. "Yes—he might put it that way!"

"He guarantees quiet, at any rate," said Hextall. "Can that be depended upon?"

"I've no doubt things will be quiet enough, sir, until Miss Tress goes down to Lynne Court," answered the valet. "Last night would frighten some of them a bit—it'll be talked about amongst them."

"The nurses will stop," continued Hextall. "Is there any one who could come to Miss Tress—any sisters?"

The valet shook his head.

"There's nobody, sir, that I know of but the three of 'em," he answered, in a low voice, again glancing at the closed door behind which sat Kesteven. "Mr. Tress, his sister, and a little brother. I don't think they've any relatives in England—never heard of or seen anybody."

"Well, keep things quiet," said Hextall. "I shall call later in the morning."

"An air of queerness about that," he remarked to his companion when the valet had left them out and they were walking towards Wimpole Street together. "What did you think of the coffee-drinking gentleman?"

"Cool customer," answered the other. "Unusually cool!"

"How would you reckon him up?" asked Hextall.

"I wouldn't reckon him up until I saw young Tress. What's he like? The sister is a beauty."

"The boy's like the sister—but weak where she's strong. Handsome lad—in his half-Spanish way. From the glimpse I had of him I should say he was in danger of drinking himself to death."

"Where did he get to, then, during this business?" asked Hextall's companion, who had gained an inkling of affairs at intervals, and was excusably inquisitive. "Bed, eh?"

"His man took him in charge," answered Hextall, grimly. "I shall be sure to see him—later."

Darrell Tress was standing by the breakfast-table when Hextall returned to the flat at seven o'clock. He was as scrupulously groomed as Kesteven himself, but his lips were trembling and his hand shaky; there was a plain odour of old brandy in the room, and he looked at the doctor with sheepish and furtive glances.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry about this—this beastly affair," he blurted out, as Hextall entered, and after a slight bow, stood regarding him silently. "Awful mistake my sister—doing what she did, you know. She—of course, if I'd known she had that revolver——"

"I am not concerned about what has happened," said Hextall. "My duty lies in seeing that nothing comes of it. Your sister will have to be kept quiet for several days."

"Oh, that's all right!" answered the lad with evident relief. "We'll see that nothing disturbs her. Kesteven and I are going away for a week—of course, the nurses will stop with her?"

Hextall, who was drawing off his gloves, looked attentively at his patient's brother. His professional eye saw sure and certain signs of recent incessant dissipation—but he also saw that Darrell Tress was quite sufficiently himself to hear a little plain truth; he also saw sufficient indications of latent good sense in him to know that he would hear straightforward speaking from a man not very much his senior.

"That means that you leave your sister in the sole care and charge of—strangers," he said dryly.

Darrell flushed under his dark skin.

"I—the fact is, we don't know anybody," he answered. "We've only been in England a few months, and——"

"Has your sister no women friends?" asked Hextall.

"I'm afraid not," replied Darrell.

"Then, said Hextall, "I should suggest that you should give up your own friends for a few days and devote yourself to seeing that your sister is properly attended to. I'll take care of her in a professional way, but neither doctors nor nurses are relatives, you know, and——"

Kesteven broke in upon them, entering from a side door with a Bradshaw in his hand. He nodded calmly to Hextall, and turned to Tress.

"The one-twenty-five's a good train," he said. "Suppose we——"

Darrell Tress looked at Hextall.

"The doctor thinks I ought to stay and look after Paquita," he said. "I—I suppose I ought. I don't think I'll go, Kesteven. You go."

Hextall caught a momentary flash of Kesteven's eye. He recognized its meaning—it showed as plainly as a look could that Kesteven was not the man to brook interference. But it was gone as swiftly as it came—and Kesteven turned a bland, understanding accommodating countenance on him.

"Oh, of course, if Dr. Hextall thinks that!" he said. "Of course—certainly! But I understood that absolute quiet was necessary, so I thought we should be best out of the way. Of course, if you wish to stay with your sister——"

Hextall went off to his patient. And here was no invalid, dependent and submissive, but a self-assertive, strongwilled young woman, who answered questions about herself with impatience, and insisted on having replies to her own.

"I'm not going to be kept lying here," she said. "All for a mere scratch of a thing like this! It's ridiculous!"

One of the nurses, an elderly woman, smiled shyly at the doctor.

"Miss Tress wants to get up," she remarked.

"Not to-day, at any rate," commanded Hextall, with a glance at the face turned on him in mutinous appeal. "You'll be getting feverish, and then I won't answer for possible complications. This was more than a mere scratch, you know. That bullet was pretty deeply imbedded."

Paquita Tress slowly moved her head and looked Hextall steadily up and down for a full minute.

"Send these women away," she said with sudden abruptness. "I want to speak to you—alone."

The two nurses left the room, and Hextall sat down by the bedside.

"Yes?" he asked quietly. "Now, what is it?"

"What you can guess, I should think, if you have the observation I credit you with," she answered. "What will make me feverish, what will undo any good you can do, is anxiety. Just that—do you see? What is my brother doing?"

"Your brother is considering how he can look after you and keep you quiet," replied Hextall. "He was thinking of going away so that you and the nurses should have this place to yourselves. But I believe he has changed his mind."

Paquita looked at him hard and long.

"And—Kesteven?" she said at last.

"The last word I heard Mr. Kesteven say was that if your brother wished to stay with you, he must stay, of course," answered Hextall, who had long since seen that it was best to be plain with her.

"Oh," she murmured. Then a sudden flash came into her eyes. "Kesteven," she said incisively, "is another incarnation of the devil!"

"Then he must be fought," laughed Hextall, good-humouredly. "Now what is it that you precisely wish? Far better tell me."

"Can I see my brother for a few minutes?" she asked.

Hextall went back to the sitting-room. And there he found Kesteven and young Tress, both standing in similar positions on either side of the breakfast-table. The positions were those of deep thought—that is to say, each stood with his hands thrust into the pockets of his trousers, and stared, with bent head, at the carpet. It was Kesteven who looked up at the doctor's entrance, and gave him a smile which on the surface at least was engaging and even frank.

"Look here, doctor," he said. "Let's be candid. Tress and I have been talking, and—in short, I think it might be well if I cleared out for a bit, eh, and left Tress and his sister together, you know?—after all, when one's got sickness in one's place—eh?"

Hextall answered the apparently frank look with one which was genuinely so.

"I certainly think that it would be well if Miss Tress could be left in absolute quiet for a few days," he answered.

"Just so," agreed Kesteven. "All right—I'm off within the hour."

He vanished briskly into an adjoining room, and Hextall turned to Tress.

"Your sister wishes to see you," he said. "And," he added with a significant look, "I think it will do her good if you tell her that your friend is going away, and that you are remaining at home."

Darrell Tress went off towards his sister's room with something of a hang-dog look on his handsome face, and Hextall let himself out of the flat and departed on a round of visits. But a sense of strange

mystery had got hold of him, and during the rest of that day he caught himself wondering, more than once, what Paquita Tress had meant when she said that Kesteven was another incarnation of the devil. He was still wondering about it, late that night, over a quiet pipe, when a sudden commotion arose at his door. There was a violent ringing of his bell, hurried voices on the threshold, one heard in entreaty and expostulation, another in high insistence. And the insistent voice was—Paquita's!

CHAPTER III

SPLENDID MISERY

HEXTALL jumped from his easy-chair with a growl of sore vexation. He flung open the door of his room and looked out into the hall. There, volubly informing his parlourmaid that she must see Dr. Hextall at once, stood the patient who ought to have been sound asleep in bed; behind her hovered the younger of the two nurses, distressed, tearful, and apparently helpless. She began to address Hextall as soon as she saw him.

"It's not my fault, doctor!" she pleaded, wringing her hands. "I couldn't stop her—she would come!"

Paquita turned a pair of star-like eyes and a glowing face on Hextall's stern and disapproving countenance. She smiled in a fashion that would have disarmed an ascetic, and made for the open door at which he stood.

"May I come in?" she demanded eagerly. "It's all right—there's no need for all this fuss. I want to speak to you—I must speak to you! Can't the nurse sit down somewhere and wait? And don't be angry with her—it isn't her fault. No one can interfere with me if I want to have my own way."

Hextall silently motioned the nurse to a waiting-room close by; then he took Paquita by the arm, led her to the chair he had just left, closed the door on

them, and turning, looked down on her with a stern disapproval which he made mighty efforts to maintain.

"I tell you what it is!" he said, with the quietness of extreme displeasure; "if you behave like this, you must be good enough to send for another doctor. It is no use being angry with the nurse, for you are evidently unmanageable. But you are treating her very badly, and——"

"I'll make it up to her," said Paquita eagerly. "I'll give her—anything she likes."

"Nothing you can give her will make up," replied Hextall. "And you are treating me badly, too. What's the use of my—but what's the use of talking to you? Are you no more than a child?—to behave in this foolish, wayward fashion!"

Paquita lifted her face to him wonderingly. Her cheeks were bright with colour, and her eyes were dark and liquid and full of light. She was certainly the loveliest woman Hextall had ever seen, and he almost forgot everything but that as he stood staring at her. He had to drag his eyes away and to nerve himself to maintain a proper professional dignity.

"Childish—childish conduct!" he insisted. "The sort of conduct I should have expected from a spoilt child of twelve!"

"I'm not a spoilt child of twelve!" exclaimed Paquita. "I'm a grown woman with a world full of trouble. That's why I came to you. I don't know a soul in all this great town that I can turn to. But if you're so angry with me, I'll go away."

She rose as she spoke, and Hextall, who, like all young men who have determined to be bachelors, was remarkably soft at heart, saw her beautiful lips quiver and a couple of great pearly tears gather in her eyes. He gently pushed her back into her chair, drew another to her side, and unconsciously threw a vast amount of sympathy and protection into his voice.

"Now!" he said. "What is it? Out with it! You'll be all the better when it is told."

Paquita dabbed her eyes with a tiny film of cobwebby lace and shook her head.

"Darrell has gone!" she said.

"Your brother!" exclaimed Hextall, frowning. "Why—I thought he was going to stay and look after you?"

"So he did—for a few hours," she replied dismally. "I knew it couldn't last. Didn't I tell you Kesteven was an incarnation of the devil? So he is—and I knew Darrell wouldn't rest until—until he was off to him. I saw how he was fidgeting and fidgeting to go. And—and in the end he went! What would you do if you had a brother, whom you loved very much, and whom you saw going straight to hell?"

There was something so absolutely simple and naïve in this question that Hextall could scarcely forbear a smile. But the girl's simplicity made him answer very seriously.

"I should move heaven and earth to stop him," he answered.

"I've moved heaven and earth—and so far it's no good," asserted Papuita. "I've said more prayers than I ever said for anything else—I've done all I could on earth, which, perhaps, isn't much. No good!—up to now. The devil—that's Kesteven—is too much for heaven and earth and me all rolled into a lump!"

"Who is Mr. Kesteven?" asked Hextall. "And how is it that he exercises this bad influence on your brother?"

"I'd give everything to know who Kesteven is!" she exclaimed. "As to the other question—why he's simply got hold of Darrell, that's all. Just got hold of him—and he does what he likes with him. And his influence is bad—bad—bad!"

"Perhaps you'd better tell me how he got hold of him," suggested Hextall. He saw that the girl wanted to talk, must talk, and he judged it best to let her talk to her heart's content. It was no business of his, all this, but he knew that unless she unburdened her conscience she would fret herself into a fever. "Did he know Mr. Kesteven before you came to England?" he asked. "Or is he a recent acquaintance?"

"I'll tell you everything," she said with sudden impetuosity. "That's what I came for—I'd have burst or something, lying there in that beastly flat, with Darrell gone, and only that nurse to stare at. Besides, I knew I could trust you—I had a good look at you when you came in last night. I think—I think

you're the first man—man!—I've seen since I came to England."

"I sincerely trust not!" said Hextall with a grim smile. "Let's hope you're mistaken. But now tell me—whatever it is you wish to tell. Because all this is very irregular, and I don't want you to talk too much—you ought to be in bed, and fast asleep."

"Being in bed with me of late has meant lying awake all night," she said. "Thinking and thinking, you know. Well—but you see, you don't know anything about us. There are three of us—Darrell, and myself, and our little brother, Ronald—he's only seven. We were never in England until about eight months ago—we came last September. You see, our father was a ranch owner out in South America—in the Argentine. He married a Spaniard—that's why I am called Paquita; it was my mother's name. She died when Ronald was about two years old. Then my father died, three years afterwards, and then Darrell ran the ranche, though he was only a boy. And I don't think things went very well, because we began to get rather poor—only it isn't so dreadful to be poor out there as it seems to be here in England. And then—last year—we became, oh, tremendously rich! Because Uncle James, whom we had never seen, died, and left us all his money and the place we now live in—Lynne Court, in Surrey. So we came home—and now I wish we'd stopped at our estancia, however poor we might have been! because then Darrell wouldn't have met Kesteven."

"Where did he meet him—and when?" asked Hextall, forced to put leading questions.

"I don't know where—but it was very soon after we came. You see, Uncle James, who was a great merchant in London, left one half of his money and Lynne Court to Darrell, and the other half in equal shares between me and Ronald. Darrell used to come up to London a good deal after we arrived at Lynne Court, and I suppose he met Kesteven somewhere. Anyway, Kesteven began coming down to Lynne Court long before last Christmas, and then he and Darrell were always together, going to race-meetings, and up to town, and they brought men to the house whom I loathed—like those you saw last night—men who drank and gambled, and oh—I can't tell you! And then Kesteven persuaded Darrell to take this flat, so that he would have a place in town—and you have a good idea, from what you saw, of what goes on there. And though Kesteven doesn't drink himself—I think that shows what a calculating devil he is!—I'm sure he's encouraged Darrell in that way, and I know he gets money from him and stands by while other men get it—confederates, I expect. You understand, don't you? Oh, I'm heartbroken! I came up last night because I would know what went on at this wretched flat, and after they thought I'd gone to bed, I watched them, and I am sure Darrell was cheated. Cheated!—of course, he's being cheated every day—he'll be cheated out of every cent he has!"

"Look here," said Hextall. "I think you mustn't mind if I ask you a few questions. How much money did your uncle leave your brother?"

"He left Darrell about half a million, and he left the same amount divided between me and Ronald," answered Paquita, calmly and unconcernedly. "But Darrell also has Lynne Court, which is a fine place—house, grounds, park, and a big farm."

"Is your brother absolute master of all this?" asked Hextall. "I mean—it's not left in trust for him?"

"Oh, it's all Darrell's, every penny and every acre," she answered. "The lawyers told me that—they said he could make ducks and drakes of it if he liked. You see, I went and complained to them about Kesteven."

"Ah! And what did they say?" asked Hextall.

"I don't think they were nice. They laughed; they were hard-faced men. They said that as Darrell was of full age, and as his property was his own, no one could interfere with him. One of them also said that there was no need for alarm—Darrell would settle down. But—he won't."

Hextall found himself faced by the difficulty which the men of law had seen. As Darrell Tress was of man's estate, and absolute master of his money and his land, nobody could meddle.

"Did you give them your ideas about Kesteven?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. They laughed again, and said something about hawks and pigeons which I didn't under-

stand—how should I have understood, knowing nothing? One of them, who was a bit kinder, said to me that young men were always a little wild when they came into money, and advised me to try what he called moral suasion on my brother. As if I know what moral suasion is!”

“He meant—you must talk to your brother for his good,” said Hextall.

“I have talked to him for his good! I have been sister, mother, grandmother, aunt and cousin to him. I talked to him to-day—I have begged and prayed of him to be a good boy, and to give up drinking so much, and to leave off gambling, and to kick Kesteven out of the door—and so far, it’s no good whatever. He listens and sometimes he promises, and now and then he cries, and then Kesteven gets hold of him with some new devilry, and he goes to the bad again. You see to-day!—there he is, off again. I knew he wouldn’t stand being mewed up there with a sick sister and two nurses. He’s gone to Kesteven, of course. Ah!—I wish I’d shot Kesteven six months ago! I had the chance once—and nobody would ever have known.”

Hextall, who had been staring at the fire, thinking, turned on his visitor with a start of surprise.

“Nonsense!” he said, sharply. “You don’t mean anything of the sort!”

But Paquita’s face was calm and unperturbed, and she smiled a little.

“Don’t I?” she answered. “Then—I do! Think what trouble it would have saved me and all of us!

That man will ruin Darrell, body and soul; therefore he's neither more or less than a dangerous wild beast who ought to be destroyed. Out there where I was brought up, we don't think as much of human life as people seem to do here. If I'd shot Kesteven out there—for the same reasons—I'd have been praised and congratulated. Here, I suppose," she continued, meditatively, "I'd get hanged."

"You'll certainly get into trouble if you're so ready with a revolver as you seemed to be last night," said Hextall. "That won't do here, you know. We're civilized in England."

Paquita gave him a look from under her long, dark eyelashes.

"I'm not a fool," she said. "I know how much your boasted civilization amounts to! Why are most English folk such hypocrites?"

Hextall got up hastily.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"Can't you help me?" she said. "I—I thought—somehow—you could—and would."

"I will, indeed—if I can!" he answered with warmth. "But—just how?"

"Can't you do something to get Darrell away from this man?" she replied. "Or—get him away from Darrell? I've no friends—and I think you'll be one. Do help somehow, and I'll—I'll do anything you ask."

Hextall stared at her—stared until he felt himself sinking into seas of danger. He recovered his senses with a jerk.

"Then obey me at once by going home, and to bed, and by strict obedience to your nurses," he said smiling. "I'll help you—all I can. We'll do something."

Unconsciously, he held out his hand, to cement the promise. To his infinite surprise and overwhelming confusion, Paquita lifted it to her bewitching lips.

CHAPTER IV

WHO IS KESTEVEN?

WHEN Paquita, smiling and obedient, had gone away with the nurse, to whom she was suddenly as affectionate as if they had been sisters, Hextall retreated into his dining-room and looked at the back of his hand. It seemed to him that he still felt Paquita's warm lips there. He was afraid to meet his own eyes in the mirror over his mantelpiece. And his hands trembled as he picked up his favourite pipe and essayed to light it.

"Good God!" he muttered. "Am I going to have softening of the brain? And—I've promised to help her! Her!"

He had struck several matches and thrown them away before he got the pipe thoroughly going, and when at last the tobacco was burning he became so abstracted that it was quickly out again. At that he threw the pipe aside with a muttered imprecation and went off to bed.

"Paquita," he mused, as he laid his head on the pillow. "Paquita is very beautiful—and very dangerous. It will be well when Paquita returns to Lynne Court."

But in the meantime, Paquita was close at hand, and he had to see her at least twice a day. On his next visit he found her much more amenable to disci-

pline and cheerful in spirit; it was very evident that the midnight conversation with him had wrought a change in her outlook on life. Evidently of an ingenuous and impulsive nature, she lost no time in letting him see that she hailed him as a friend, and Hextall realized that he was being expected to make good his promise in true and knightly fashion.

"But we must move warily," he said, not wishing her to anticipate too much. "You don't know where these two are, do you?"

"Oh, yes, I do!" she answered. "Fowler—that's Darrell's man—told me this morning. It turns out that Kesteven telephoned to Darrell last evening from Brighton, and Darrell made an excuse to Fowler and set off there at once, leaving Fowler in charge. Of course he said it was business, and he'd be back as quickly as possible, but I know what it means. They'll stay there as long as they're amused, and then they'll go to Lynne Court, and when I return I shall find the house full of the usual set. Never mind! I'm sure you'll help me."

Hextall left her, feeling that he had promised more than he could easily perform. To attempt the reformation and reclamation of a young man of the Darrell Tress type was a stiff thing, and at present he saw no way in which to set about it. He was inclined, being a good deal of a utilitarian, to take the view of the lawyers to whom Paquita had appealed, and from whom she had got such scant sympathy. There was nothing novel nor striking about the case—it was merely the familiar instance of the

rich young man falling amongst thieves, with no power of detecting their intentions, and no great desire to protect himself. In all these cases there were two possible developments—Darrell Tress might suddenly sicken of his surfeit of questionable pleasures, pull himself up, and reform, or he might go under before anybody could work a reformation in him. But Hextall knew enough of life to feel assured that, in any case, Kesteven, if he was the hawk that circumstances seemed to suggest, would do a good deal towards plucking his pigeon before it escaped him.

As he was leaving the flat that morning Fowler, the valet, met him in the hall, and looked meaningfully at him.

"You want to speak to me?" asked Hextall, interpreting the look into a desire for conversation.

"A word or two, if you please, sir," said Fowler. He led the way into a small sitting-room, evidently sacred to himself, and closed the door. "It's about what we saw that night, sir," he continued. "I thought I'd better mention it, because as you're attending Miss Tress, you won't want her disturbed."

"Well?" said Hextall.

"You saw that man who put the money back on the table, sir?" asked Fowler. "The dark-faced fellow with the bit of pointed moustache?"

"I saw him."

"He was here last night. I had a nice job to get him away. He wanted Mr. Kesteven. It was just

after Mr. Tress went off. I—I'm afraid there may be trouble with that man, sir."

"How?" asked Hextall.

"He said that Mr. Kesteven persuaded him to hand over that money—which he swears he won fairly—so that Miss Paquita would calm down, and that Mr. Kesteven promised he'd meet him at noon yesterday, and give it back to him. It's true that Mr. Kesteven pocketed it after you and the nurses had got Miss Paquita into her room—I saw him pocket it when he and I began putting the place straight. But this man said that Kesteven never turned up at the place they were to meet at. And so he came here for him—and a nice temper he was in, too! As I say, I'd a job to get him off. And—he went off with a threat, sir."

"What threat?"

"Well, sir, he threatened that if Mr. Kesteven didn't hand back that money at once, he'd go to the police about the revolver business, and charge Miss Paquita with threatening to shoot him. And—I don't know where Mr. Kesteven is, sir. Nor where Mr. Tress is."

"I thought they were at Brighton," said Hextall.

"No, sir! I told Miss Paquita that—I had to tell her something to keep her quiet. Mr. Kesteven went away at noon yesterday, and he telephoned to Mr. Tress about seven last night, and Mr. Tress had a couple of suit-cases packed, and went off in a car somewhere or other to meet him, I expect. But I don't know where they are. What am I to do if this man comes again, sir?"

"Do you know him?" asked Hextall.

"No, sir, I don't. There's a certain set of 'em that's come here to play, but he's not one of them—he'd never been here before that night. I neither knew him nor the other man—he'd never been before, either. Mr. Kesteven brought both of them—the three came in just after Mr. and Miss Tress had come back from the theatre."

"You don't even know their names?"

"Don't even know that, sir. I know a lot—a big lot!—of gentlemen about town, but I'd never set eyes on either of those two before—never."

"Was it any considerable amount of money that was in question?" asked Hextall.

Fowler smiled.

"I saw several hundred pound bank-notes among it before Mr. Kesteven picked it up, sir," he answered. "They've been playing high, sir—very high indeed—I never saw anything like it, sometimes. Of course, it's not my place to make remarks, but I've drawn my own conclusions, and it's high time Mr. Tress was protected."

"From—whom!" asked Hextall. He was hating and loathing all this sordid revelation, and he felt a certain nausea in asking the question—but not far off was Paquita, and the remembrance of his promise to her was strong in his mind.

The valet made a grimace and shook his head.

"Kesteven!" he said. "Kesteven! He's got hold of my young master, and he's plucking him—like you'd pluck a chicken!"

Hextall looked at the valet in silence for a moment. He knew that servants of this class were adepts in knowledge of what went on amongst the masters they served; Fowler looked old enough to be the depository of many secrets. There was a knowing gleam in the eye which he turned on the young doctor as he spoke of Kesteven, and Hextall, much as he disliked doing it, could not forbear from taking the hint.

"Since you've said so much," he observed, "I may as well tell you that Miss Tress has been complaining to me about the influence which Mr. Kesteven exerts on her brother. She seems to think it——"

Fowler laughed a little.

"Oh, I know, sir! I've been down at Lynne Court—several times. I've pitied Miss Paquita from the bottom of my heart. Oh—yes!"

"Do you know anything of Mr. Kesteven?" asked Hextall. "You say you know a lot of men about town. Did you know him when he came here first?"

"Oddly enough, sir—no! I have known a lot of his sort, in my time—you know, sir, the sort of men who fasten on to rich young fellows, and stick to them like leeches till they've bled 'em dry—hawks, as they used to call 'em when I was younger. But I didn't know him—and what's still queerer, none of my friends know him. We've talked—as gentlemen's servants do talk, sir, whether anybody knows it or not—and none of us know him. We can't recall him or place him. I've friends who know every man of

that sort in the West End, and I've pointed Kesteven out to them; nobody recognizes him."

Hextall felt that he was in for far-reaching matters by this time, and he began to ask further questions without scruple.

"Do you know how and when Mr. Tress met him?" he inquired.

"Not for certain, sir," replied Fowler. "That is—as to how they met. I know when it was. Mr. Tress had just engaged me; he had a suite of rooms at the Carlton Hotel at that time, last winter. He went to the steeplechases at Newbury for a couple of days and stayed at Reading—I did'nt go with him, as I'd a violent cold. He brought Kesteven back—and Kesteven's never left him since. That was when they met, sir; but as to how they met, or who made them known to each other, I don't know. I expect they just picked each other up—on the race-course."

"I dare say you can answer a question that is possibly very pertinent," remarked Hextall. "In what condition was Kesteven when he came? I mean—how did he present himself to you? Was he well dressed—did he seem to be in good circumstances?"

The valet laughed sneeringly.

"He was well dressed enough, sir," he answered, "but it was all the suit he had: a first-class tweed. That, and a smart overcoat, and a small suit-case, filled with good linen and dressing appointments, was all he ever brought to us. But," he added, with a wink, "he'd plenty within a fortnight—more than a dozen suit-cases like his would have held!"

"You mean—at Mr. Tress's expense?" suggested Hextall.

"Just so, sir—at Mr. Tress's expense. I know, of course, because tradesmen talk. Mr. Tress took him around to all his tradesmen—tailors, hosiers, shoemakers, hatters—they all sent their bills to Mr. Tress. Lord, bless you, sir!" concluded Fowler, "Why, there isn't a man goes down Piccadilly who's better dressed than Kesteven! Oh, he's feathering his nest—there's no doubt about that! A cool hand, sir, and a clever one. Likes a good glass of wine, and knows what is good, but never touches a drink between meals, and never takes more than a very modest amount with his meals. He's not the sort that wants brandy-and-soda or a half-bottle of champagne first thing in a morning—China tea's his mark, or good coffee. When a man's only capital is his brain, sir—eh?"

"You mean, that Kesteven knows how to take care of his?" said Hextall, smiling.

"No man better, sir. He's always got his wits about him. I've noticed that when they're going to play, here at nights, or down at Lynne Court, Kesteven never even drinks at dinner. Not he!—a mouthful of mineral water, with a squeeze of lemon in it, is all he wants."

"There is one thing I can't quite make out," observed Hextall. "I don't understand his encouraging Mr. Tress to drink."

Fowler shook his head.

"He doesn't, sir—I'll say that for him," he answered frankly. "Miss Paquita blames him for that, but she's wrong. The truth is, sir, Mr. Tress had got on to that game before Kesteven came on the scene. When I first came to him, he'd been alone for some time in that suite of rooms he had at the Carlton, and I found that he'd got into the habit of having a pint of champagne as soon as he got up. He's got past that, sir—it's brandy-and-soda—strong, now. No!—that's not Kesteven's fault. My own opinion is—but perhaps I've no right to give it."

"Say what you think," said Hextall. "It will go no further."

"Well, I think that Kesteven sees how things are, and he's making a purse for himself as fast as ever he can," replied the valet. "And that's why I don't understand his bringing those other two men here the other night—and not settling up with the dark fellow who came back last evening. I know all the men who've come here except those two—they I don't know, and I'm certain there's some mystery about them, and about that night. Now, what am I to do, sir, if that man returns? Shall I warn——"

Just then a ring sounded from the outer door of the flat. Fowler excused himself and went to answer it. A moment later he returned, shaking his head.

"He's here again, doctor!" he whispered. "He's at the door now, and the other man is with him."

CHAPTER V

THE GREEK GENTLEMEN

HEXTALL'S soul rose in revolt on hearing this news. He realized that he was suddenly thrown into an unpleasant predicament. These men were evidently bent on mischief: the master of the flat was away, and his mentor with him; Fowler, after all, was only a serving man. And there, behind a door or two, was an invalid.

"Well?" he said, looking at the valet.

Fowler returned the look with a shake of the head which suggested perplexity and entreaty; it was clear that he was the sort of man who instinctively depends upon a stronger will than his own.

"They won't go away for me, sir," he said. "They declare they're going to stop here until they see somebody. I thought, perhaps, that you would speak to them?—being the doctor."

"Where are they?" asked Hextall, unwilling. "In the hall?"

"No, sir—I didn't let them in. They're on the landing. I told them that neither Mr. Tress nor Mr. Kesteven were here, but they wouldn't believe me. Perhaps if you told them—ah!"—he broke off as the electric bell rang again. "There they are, you see, sir! If they start that game——"

Hextall suddenly left the room and marched to the front door. He opened it quietly, slipped out, and

closed it behind him. The two men without, both medium-heighted, slightly-built individuals stepped mechanically back as he emerged, and looked up in some surprise at his tall figure. And one muttered a couple of words to his companion.

"The doctor!"

"Look here!" said Hextall, with characteristic bluntness. "You must be good enough to go away. I can't have my patient disturbed by your ringing or knocking. The manservant has told you that Mr. Tress and Mr. Kesteven are not here—they are away from home. You are aware that Miss Tress met with a serious accident, the other night—in your presence. As her medical adviser——"

The man of the sinister eyes interrupted him with a smile that was half incredulous, half sneering.

"That is all very well," he said, in a voice marked by a strong foreign accent. "But we do not know anything about Miss Tress, or Miss Anybody—we do not know any names of anybody that lives here—Miss, Mrs. or Mr. We want those two men that we met here the other night—the man that brought us here, and the other we found here—with the young woman."

Hextall started at the contemptuous tone in which the last two words were spoken. His face flushed, and he drew himself up, and looked the speaker over in warning fashion.

"I think you had better adopt a civil tone," he said.

The man addressed laughed, showing his white teeth under his black moustache, and a resentful gleam came into his eyes.

"All right—just so!" he said, with a glance at his companion. "If I speak plain to you, it is not so plain as I can speak to the police—eh? We go there if we don't get satisfaction here, you understand? No offence to you—you are the doctor—eh, yes! But—you don't know all."

"I can't have my patient disturbed," repeated Hex-tall, who could think of nothing else to say. "I must ask you to go away. Come back—if you must—when Mr. Tress returns."

"Mr. Tress? Oh, yes, but we don't know any Mr. Tress," retorted the leader, while his companion laughed incredulously. "All we know is—this flat. And what happened to us—here. Some of it you saw—the end of it. Look you!" he continued, his volubility increasing. "We show you how it is, eh? Then you will understand. We are Greek gentlemen—in business in Manchester—well-known gentlemen. We come to London for a little pleasure, eh? The other night we dine at the Café Imperial—all right. We get talking—you known—to the man you saw here—the elder man, fine-looking fellow. We have a drink or two with him—very pleasant man, very agreeable. He suggests we have a quiet little game of cards at a friend's. Well—no objection—little what you call spree, eh? We come here with him—we find the young fellow, the—young lady. Everything goes all right at first—we have another drink—

talk—quite agreeable, oh quite! Then the young lady retires, and we play. We play some time, and I win—quite fairly I win. I do not cheat—no! Why should I cheat?—I am a gentleman; I have plenty of money—but!—I give you my card to show you who I am—my friend he give you his card, too. Ask anybody in Manchester if they know our names—oh, yes!”

Before Hextall could do anything to prevent them, each man had pulled out a beautiful card-case and had forced upon him highly-finished, perfectly-engraved cards. He glanced at them and read: Mr. Victor Demetriadi—Mr. George Chimbouloglos. In the corners of each were addresses in one of the best residential quarters of Manchester.

“These!—all correct—eh?” continued Mr. Victor Demetriadi. “Quite respectable, eh? Well, I tell you. We continue to play—I win more—I win twelve hundred pounds—yes!”

“Twelve hundred pounds!” exclaimed Hextall.

“Yes, but half an hour before that I am losing fifteen hundred!” exclaimed Demetriadi. “Eh—eh? There was no talk of cheating then—no! But, you see, we had settled to stop at two o’clock, precise. Well, at five minutes to two, I am winning twelve hundred—I have it in my pocket, because we pay up as we go on—plenty of money in there behind you! Then out comes the girl—the young lady—with a revolver, and says we are cheating her brother—me, most!—and threatens to shoot—especially me—holds the revolver at my head, eh? Oh!—it was all what

you call a plant! A plant—of course! If I had been losing—if my friend Chimbouloglos had been losing at two o'clock—what?"

"It was at any rate no plant that my patient got shot," observed Hextall quietly.

The two young men turned and looked at each other. A glance of intelligence passed between them which was not lost on Hextall. But neither spoke, and Hextall was suddenly minded to ask a question.

"As you witnessed the affair, how did she get shot?" he said.

Once more the two exchanged glances. Then one glance seemed to answer the other, and the man who had kept silence up to then spoke.

"The elder man tried to take the revolver from her," he replied quietly, and with less accent than his companion. "She struggled, and in the struggle the revolver went off. But she retained her hold on it, and she kept us covered until you came."

Demetriadi laughed.

"Bah!" he sneered "All a plant! I tell you, if I had lost—if my friend had lost much—then, ah, then, it would have been all right. This is a swindling affair—all confederates—of course!"

"I understand," said Hextall, who was now determined to get at the bottom of things, "that you were induced to put the money back on a promise that it should be handed to you yesterday. Is that so?"

"So! The elder man, he says: 'Put it back and quieten the girl, and I bring it to you at the Café Imperial, at noon—all right.' And Chimbouloglos

here, he say the same thing. So—I pay it back. But—we go to the Café Imperial at noon, yesterday, and we wait—and no man, and no money! No, I am cheated—done in—what they call had-for-the-mug! But——”

He wagged a finger at the closed door behind Hextall, and his teeth gleamed under the dark moustache.

“I will have my money what I fairly win, or I will have my revenge!” he said. “I will go to the police. Chimbouloglos, he say, ‘Leave it alone—do not trouble yourself—the money is nothing!’ Just so—the money is nothing—I have plenty of money—I am a very rich man. But—my honour! I am brought here—gambling den, eh?—I win my money fair and square, as you call it—then I am threatened with revolver, made to pay back on a promise—and the men hook it! But—the woman is here—trapped! Bah!—Chimbouloglos is what the vulgar boys call fat-head!”

“Mr. Chimbouloglos is a very wise man,” said Hextall. “I give you the same advice. And I assure you that you are under a wrong impression about the young lady inside—quite wrong!”

“Wrong!” exclaimed the injured one. “What!—when she stick a revolver at my head, and threaten to blow out my brains if I don’t put back the money I have fairly won? Oh, no, no, no!—I am not a fool, Mr. Doctor—come, now!”

For a moment of silence Hextall looked the two over more carefully. Mr. George Chimbouloglos seemed to him to be a good-tempered, easy-going sort

of young man; Mr. Victor Demetriadi, in spite of his sinister eyes, looked to have some good points. Paquita's newly-enrolled knight resolved, in her service, to use a little diplomacy, and to see what an appeal to whatever sense of honour the two young men possessed would do.

"I am sure you are not a fool, Mr. Demetriadi," he said, "and I am also sure you are both men of honour. Now, supposing I give you my word of honour that you are mistaken?"

Chimbouloglos nodded readily enough, but Demetriadi stared.

"But I see it with my own sight!" he exclaimed. "What!—you think I don't know what is a revolver—me?"

"We mustn't stand talking here all day," said Hextall. "Step round to my house with me for a moment, and I think I can explain matters to you—all except one, at any rate."

The two Greeks followed him without demur. And as he led them round to Wimpole Street, Hextall reflected, with a sense of grim amazement, on the extreme smallness of this world. He himself was a Lancastrian, and he had learnt his medicine, and walked his hospitals at the Victoria University in Manchester; consequently he knew Manchester well, and he had at once recognized the names of the two Greeks as those of two leading houses in the Greek trading community of the great Lancashire city. These were evidently scions of those houses, up for a lark in London—and the pride and spirit of Mr.

Victor Demetriadi had been touched. For Paquita's sake, he must give them an explanation—at Kesteven's cost.

Being a little of a diplomatist Hextall first spoke of Manchester and his own connexion with it—this transferred matters to a friendly footing. Then, pledging the two young men to secrecy, and putting them on their honour, he told them as much as he thought it necessary they should know. And to his great relief Demetriadi immediately accepted the situation.

"Oh, in that case!" he said, spreading out his hands; "of course, I have no more to say, eh? Nothing! I am sorry for the young lady. But that fellow—what you call Kesteven, eh? Ah! And——"

He broke off sharply and glanced at his companion, and once more the two exchanged the look of significance which Hextall had twice previously noticed. Presently Demetriadi went on:

"Perhaps we better tell you something we see, or think we see," he said. "Something that make us——"

Chimbouloglos quietly interrupted him.

"I don't simply think I saw," he said. "I did see!"

"You tell him, then," said Demetriadi. "You know," he added, turning to Hextall, "I—maybe I didn't see as clearly as Chimbouloglos that night—I'd had a good deal of wine, eh? Not too much—but plenty. But Chimbouloglos he hadn't—he see all right, you know."

"What did you see?" asked Hextall.

Chimbouloglos flicked the ash from his cigarette and looked thoughtfully after it as it fell. When he looked up at Hextall his youthful face was very grave and he shook his head.

"It's a serious thing to have to say," he answered, "and I shouldn't say it if I weren't certain of it. But since you've told us what you have about that man Kesteven, I'll tell you of this. That revolver didn't go off by accident."

"What!" exclaimed Hextall. "You mean——"

"I mean that I'm absolutely certain that Kesteven discharged it as he was trying to take it from the girl," said Chimbouloglos. "It was my impression that he meant to shoot her. I was just behind them—I saw his hand. She started violently just then—or she'd have been shot through the heart. I'm sure!"

"You can trust Chimbouloglos," remarked Deme-triadi. "If he says he saw—he saw."

Hextall received this news in silence. And when his two visitors had gone, he sat for a long time staring at nothing—thinking. The atmosphere of mystery had suddenly been deepened by something that looked very like the foreshadowing of murder. He saw, by one of those sudden mental illuminations which come as if they were directly inspired, how Kesteven, if he really wished to get rid of Paquita Tress, had had an admirable opportunity during that struggle for the revolver of achieving his object without incriminating himself. No one would have suspected that he meant to shoot her: he had the best of all possible reasons for interfering with her before

she could have hurt others or herself. It could easily have been done—Kesteven would have no idea that the young Greek had particularly watchful eyes. Easily done! The more Hextall considered it, the more he was inclined to believe in the story he had just heard. But—why should Kesteven wish to kill Paquita? A big question—and one that gave rise to many other questions and doubts and problems. Out of the cloud of these rose a clear fact—Paquita was in danger. He turned to his day's work realizing that his promise to help her was going to involve him in complications the result of which it was at that time impossible to foresee.

CHAPTER VI

MR. SMITH OF PUMP COURT

AT five o'clock that afternoon, Hextall jumped out of a taxi-cab at the top of Middle Temple Lane, and hastily descending that ancient throughfare turned off into Pump Court, where he proceeded to climb a flight of well-worn stairs until he came to an oaken door on the lintel of which was painted in faded white letters the name "Mr. John Smith." Those learned in the peculiar mysteries of the various Inns of Court would have deduced two facts from those faded letters and from that lintel—namely, that, first, Mr. John Smith had occupied the set of chambers behind the double door for some time, and that, second, he did not share them with anybody else. They might further have argued from these two facts that Mr. John Smith was a successful barrister who had no need to share chambers and clerks, and kept up a fine show of both. In that, however, they would have been wrong—the plain truth was that Smith, an old schoolfellow of Hextall's, was a man of considerable means, who trifled a little at the Bar, and worked hard at what other men would have treated as a hobby. It pleased him to have a large set of chambers all to himself, and he never felt lonely in them in spite of the fact that he kept but one clerk, who was duly on show between the hours of ten and five-thirty.

This clerk opened the outer oak in answer to Hextall's knock. He was a queer-faced, slightly squint-eyed, foxy-haired individual, and John Smith boasted that it took him from half-past four to half-past five every afternoon to wash away the ink-stains which he had accumulated since his arrival in the morning, the spilling and smearing of ink over his hands and face being apparently one of his chief objects in life. Hextall caught him in this ablutionary stage, and looked thoughtfully at as much as he could see of him over a mass of soapsuds and towel.

"Good afternoon, Styler," said Hextall. "Mr. Smith in?"

"No, he ain't, Doctor Hextall, and that's a fact, unusual as it is," answered Styler, cheerful and unabashed. "The truth is, sir, there's a very interesting case on, down at the C. C. C., sir—Central Criminal Court, you know—and Mr. Smith's been there all day. I looked in myself this afternoon, sir, and it was expected to be over before or about five, so I don't think he'll be long now. Won't you come in doctor?—I don't think from what I heard of it that it could last much longer—plain murder case, but with a few very nice, interesting incidents: that's what attracted the guv'nor, of course."

"I suppose murder cases and those sort of things appeal to you, don't they, Styler?" observed Hextall, as he walked into Smith's inner rooms and dropped into a chair. "You like that atmosphere?"

"Love it!" answered Styler, polishing himself vigorously with a towel. "It's meat, drink, victuals,

fire, tobacco, and a sweetheart to me, Doctor Hextall! Ah, I'm getting on, I am! Since I came here—three years now—I've improved my knowledge of criminal law something wonderful! Mr. Smith, he's been tremendously good to me; I've the run of all these books, sir, and the inestimable privilege of sitting at Mr. Smith's feet, as it were, and I've formed a nice little collection of criminal books and documents at home, myself—and, by the by, Doctor Hextall, if you don't mind my mentioning it, sir, you haven't an old copy of a good work on forensic medicine that you could give away, have you? A Guy and Ferrier, now, sir, or a Taylor?—I've been looking for one on the second-hand stalls for months, but——”

“I'll see,” replied Hextall, good-humouredly. “What use are you going to make of all this knowledge, Styler?”

The clerk, who was putting a final polish on the tips of a pair of large prominent ears, began to smile. The smile awoke in the middle of his lips and gradually extended, slowly revealing large, shark-like teeth: Hextall was unconsciously reminded of seeing an alligator slowly opening its mouth in a tank at the Zoological Gardens.

“Ah, well, sir!” answered Styler, coyly. “We'll see, we'll see! Rome was not built in a day, I believe, Doctor Hextall. I'm not without ambition, sir, and—here's the guv'nor!”

A little, fat, round-faced, rosy-cheeked gentleman mild-eyed, gold-spectacled, almost venerable in spite of the fact he was obviously no more than thirty years

of age, came softly into the room, beaming on its occupant. He was in wig and gown, the wig a little awry, the gown bunched up in a plump, white hand, and he looked as mild a mannered man as ever exchanged gentle witticisms with a judicial joker. No one, judging by appearances, would have suspected Mr. John Smith of sharing the tastes of his clerk in the matter of criminology.

"Hello, Hextall?" he said, in a voice as mild and gentle as his looks. "Didn't expect to find you here. What brings you?"

"Something that will interest you," answered Hextall. "A—case."

"Well, I expected that from merely seeing you," observed Smith. He threw off his gown, handed his wig to Styler, dropped into an easy chair, and produced a cigarette-case. "Something that's occurred in your practice?" he asked, when the clerk had gone away. "And that is, of course, of pressing importance. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here; I think you'd have waited until we met. Take a cigarette and tell me what it is."

He settled himself in his chair, leaned his head comfortably against the padded back, closed his eyes behind the gold-rimmed spectacles, and listened in unbroken silence while Hextall told his story. When it came to an end he threw away his cigarette, took off his spectacles, and sat up. The mild, blue eyes suddenly flashed into wakefulness.

"That's deeply interesting, Hextall," he said. "It interests—me. That's admitting a good deal. There's a lot behind the superficial facts of the story."

"You think so?" said Hextall, uneasily. He had half hoped that Smith would pooh-pooh the whole thing and laugh at him. "You think it's an affair that ought to be looked into?"

"Oh, certainly! I'm afraid you'll have to look into it, as you've pledged yourself to the young lady," answered Smith, with a quiet smile. "As I happen to know your slightly quixotic temperament, I'm sure you will. Now, I'll make one or two remarks. First of all, as to the story of the two young Greeks. It's not at all strange, as I chance to be a Manchester man, that I know those chaps—just know them: I met both when I was last in Manchester. Young Victor is the nephew of old Antonio Demetriadi, the big merchant—he's only recently come to their business house from Athens, and he's inclined to be a bit of a rake. The other lad is of a quieter sort. If George Chimbouloglos says he's certain that he saw this man Kesteven attempt to shoot Miss Paquita, you may be sure that he did see—something of that sort."

Hextall frowned and drew a long breath.

"Then—she's in danger?" he muttered.

"I should say she, and her brother, and the little brother, are all in danger—and from Kesteven," answered Smith quietly. "The next word is—Why? That's to be found out."

"I told you what the valet, Fowler, says," remarked Dr. Hextall. "Nobody knows Kesteven."

"Nobody that Fowler knows," corrected Smith. "But Fowler's world is confined to Fowler's sort—Fowler's fellow-gentlemen's gentlemen. Somebody will know Kesteven. You want me to help?"

"If you will!" exclaimed Hextall. "I know if you take a hand you'll do it thoroughly. But—what can we do?"

Smith smiled and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I shouldn't think much of my powers if I couldn't do something," he answered. "What we'll do is to find out about Kesteven—who he is. Now, can you trust this valet, Fowler?"

"I think so," replied Hextall. "He's certainly no love for Kesteven."

"Can you get Fowler to come to your house for an hour this evening?" asked Smith. "You can? Very good—make it nine o'clock. I shall send Styler to meet him. You'll leave them together. And you'll tell Fowler to bring with him, if possible, a photograph of Kesteven, and one of Mr. Darrell Tress."

"Styler!" exclaimed Hextall. "You mean to set him to work?"

"I mean to set the smartest sleuth-hound that I know of to work," answered Smith. "Leave it to me! When you're gone, I shall tell Styler what you've told me, in my own way, and I shall send him up to have a chat with Fowler, to-night. After that, Styler will take his own line in finding out all about Mr. Kesteven. But—he will find out."

"You think so?" said Hextall, half incredulously.

"Bet you a new topper!" answered Smith. "And with small delay, too."

"Supposing there is nothing to be found out?" suggested Hextall.

Smith's expression became judicial.

"My dear fellow!" he said. "Come—come! There is something to be found out about every man. Where's your knowledge of human nature? Leave Styler to that job. That point's settled, then. Now, we come to point number two—which is Miss Paquita. Now, she seems to be in careful hands at present—there's one or other of the nurses always with her?"

"Always," replied Hextall.

"Very good," said Smith. "How soon can she be moved to Lynne Court?"

"Oh—in three days."

"Also very good. Now, you must be guided by me. You will take Miss Paquita down there yourself—you'll run down in a car in less than two hours—and you'll just have a look at the place. But—more important than that—you'll impress upon her that for a short time, at any rate, she must retain those two nurses. They must go with her. You must give them strict orders, that until you give further instructions, she is to be under the surveillance of one or other of them always—always. You understand, by night and day. You can see to that?—you can thoroughly depend upon these nurses?"

Hextall remembered Paquita's recent midnight escapade. She had then paid scant attention to the nurse who was left in charge of her. But upon reflection he decided that Paquita was now much more amenable—he believed that she would do what he told her to do.

"All right," he answered. "I'll see to that. She shall be watched night and day."

"Very good—that's all right," said Smith. "I'm giving you all these instructions with a purpose. And it's for a purpose that I want you to go down to Lynne Court with your patient. I want you to see the little brother she spoke of."

"Yes?" said Hextall, wonderingly. "Why?"

"You've seen Miss Paquita; you've seen the elder brother; now I want you to see the younger one. I want you to observe if he's a healthy youngster; in whose charge he is; anything you notice about him, and about the arrangements made for him. Never mind why, now—but give me your report when you come back."

"I don't know what you're after," said Hextall, "but I'll obey you."

"I know what I'm after. While you're doing these things, I shall be doing something else—making myself thoroughly acquainted with the history of the Tress family and the circumstances under which these young people came into this wealth. It's a good job, Hextall, in cases of this sort, that guardian angels like you and me can find things out—and in this particular case, egad! I think the young folks do want

guardianizing. Now, you haven't any idea where this young ass Darrell has got to?"

"Not the least! But he's with Kesteven, of course."

"Oh, of course! Well, they'll either turn up, or news of them will turn up. Now we've done all we can at present, so off you go and arrange for Fowler to meet Styler at your house to-night, at nine o'clock. And after you've taken Miss Paquita and her nurses down to Lynne Court come back and report to me."

Hextall always took John Smith at his word, and he rose obediently and made for the door. But before he opened it he ventured one further question.

"I'm to leave Styler and the valet alone?"

"Absolutely—and don't ask Styler any questions afterwards," replied Smith, with a bland smile. "Styler's peculiar methods are mole-like, and like all moles he doesn't care about being seen when's he's digging a way underground. However, he's unlike the mole in one important respect—he doesn't cast up evidences of his labours. Off you go, and leave matters to me."

Hextall went back to the West, and saw Fowler, and made his arrangements, and impressed particular secrecy on him. As he had expected, he found the valet ready and eager enough to enter into any plot against Kesteven; it appeared that he had several crows to pull with that individual, and was only too glad to begin the process. What passed between him and Styler at their interview that night, Hextall did not know, but he chanced to see them in his hall as

they went away, and he fancied from a certain gleam in the valet's eye, and from an assured smug satisfaction in the clerk's queer face, that their secret conference had yielded pleasure to both of them.

CHAPTER VII

THE EARLY MORNING TELEGRAMS

As Hextall was putting the finishing touches to his toilet next morning, he heard a taxi-cab pull up at his door, and looking out of the window, he saw John Smith dismount from it, followed by a tall, quietly-attired, middle-aged woman. He hastily finished his dressing and ran down, to find his visitors in the hall.

"A word or two with you," said Smith. "This is Nurse Palliser. Let her sit down in one of your waiting-rooms for a few minutes while we talk. Look here," he went on, when he and Hextall were alone in the consulting-room. "That woman outside there is a fully trained, properly certificated nurse. She's also one of my most valued assistants."

"Yes?" responded Hextall, who was already seeing what Smith was after. "And you want——"

"I want you to take her down to Lynne Court as one of your patient's two nurses. You can easily get rid of one of the two you now have, and instal Nurse Palliser in her place. Do it without exciting any suspicion on the part of the other nurse. As for Nurse Palliser, she'll take good care to arouse no suspicion in anybody—she's as clever as they make 'em. I've employed her before—several times. All you've got to do is to arrange with her—now—when she's to come to her patient."

"You want her to be in a position to report to you, I suppose?" said Hextall.

"Just so—especially after what Styler told me last night. He got a good deal out of Fowler which you wouldn't have got. Never mind that, now. Make these arrangements, and take Miss Paquita with the two women down to Surrey—when?"

"The day after to-morrow," answered Hextall promptly. "In the afternoon."

He had no difficulty in carrying out Smith's wishes.

Paquita, rapidly recovering from the first shock of her accident, was evidently only too pleased to let her doctor and new-found friend make any arrangements he considered necessary, and she left the flat in high spirits. She and Hextall travelled in one car; the nurses in a second; all the way through the Surrey lanes she laughed and chattered with gay vivacity. But as they approached the hill country of the Sussex border she became thoughtful and almost gloomy.

"There's Lynne Court!" she said suddenly, pointing to a house which showed against the sky-line on a distant hill. "There—up amongst the woods. I thought I should be glad to see it—and now I'm not."

"Why?" asked Hextall.

"Because I don't know what I shall find when I get there!" she answered. "They may be there—Darrell and Kesteven. If they are, there'll be more of the Kesteven sort with them. In that case——"

"I don't think you'll find them there," said Hextall. "And if they are—why, then, I shall have to speak to them pretty plainly."

Paquita sighed.

"What a blessing Fowler happened to light on you!" she said artlessly. "And what a relief to have a man about that one can depend upon! Will you really have to go back to London—at once?"

"Must!" replied Hextall with forced determination. "But I'm always within call, you know."

There was no Darrell and no Kesteven at Lynne Court. And Lynne Court itself, an old, grey-walled, half-timbered manor-house, set amidst pine woods, on a slope of the hills which overlook the Sussex Weald, seemed to Hextall to be suggestive of nothing but peace.

The house itself was ancient and picturesque: its gardens and pleasure grounds were ideal; from a south terrace there was a glimpse of the English Channel; the whole place was one in which to dream away one's days. And Paquita evidently saw what her companion was thinking and turned to him with quick intuition as they reached the house.

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "It is beautiful, and it would be all right—if it weren't for—you know what. Here's my little brother, Ronnie."

Mindful of his promise to John Smith, Hextall looked with interest at the boy who came running out to greet his sister. He was a fine, healthy-looking lad of seven, alert, quick-spirited; Hextall fancied that the evidences of the Spanish strain in him were

more marked than in his brother and sister. There was evidently nothing wrong with him, physically or mentally, and Hextall turned his attention to a young woman who followed him, a slight, rather pretty, decidedly prim and proper person, whom Paquita presently introduced as Miss Brock, the governess. Behind these two, at the door, were gathered some upper servants, a staid housekeeper, a grave-faced butler, a footman or two, all evidently delighted to see their young mistress. Within a few minutes Hextall gained the impression of an atmosphere of great comfort and luxury—a big house, troops of servants, every modern convenience that heart could desire, well-oiled domestic machinery, and, outwardly, lacking nothing. And its young master was away from it, rioting, debauching—where?

Paquita, vigorous in spite of her accident, insisted on personally taking her nurses to their rooms; Hextall was left alone for a while in a library which looked out on the southward view. He was wondering what was going to come of all this, when Paquita came back to him looking a good deal concerned. She closed the door behind her and led him into one of the deeply embrasured windows.

“Ronnie has just told me something queer,” she said. “He says that the other night he saw Kesteven!”

“Kesteven! Where?” exclaimed Hextall.

Paquita looked round at the door and sank her voice to a whisper.

"I'll tell you what he told me," she said. "He's a quick child and he has sense enough even at his age to keep things to himself. He says that the other night—a few nights ago—he couldn't sleep after he went to bed, and he got up to look out of the window at the moonlight. And on the terrace, near the yew-tree, he saw Mr. Kesteven—with Miss Brock."

"The governess!"

"Yes. What made him tell me was that he heard me ask the housekeeper if Mr. Tress and Mr. Kesteven were here or had been here since I went away. When she said they hadn't, Ronnie pulled me aside and told me—that. And now it makes me think. Because it was Kesteven who got Miss Brock for us. I wanted a governess for Ronnie, and he brought Miss Brock."

"You don't think the boy is mistaken?" suggested Hextall, after a pause.

"No! I'm sure he's not. Ronnie is very observant. What shall I do? Shall I ask Miss Brock what Kesteven was doing here?"

Hextall quickly thought over this question.

"No!" he answered. "Don't! Wait. Look here!" he went on earnestly. "I want you to feel that you're all right so long as you have my two nurses with you. Be good, and obey them—to please me. If there's the least need for me, you've only to wire, and I shall be with you as fast as a car can bring me. In any case, I shall be here to see you the day after to-morrow—professionally, you know."

"I'm not afraid about myself," answered Paquita. "I'm wondering where my unfortunate brother is. Of course, I know what'll happen. He'll turn up in a day or two, repentant and remorseful because he left me in London, and he'll promise amendment, and then Kesteven will come on the scene again, and—but there, what's the use of talking? Come and have some tea."

Hextall remained at Lynne Court until the close of the afternoon, and then, after a confidential talk with the two nurses and a promise to Paquita to be back on the next day but one, set off in his car to London. An hour later, as he was slowly riding through Epsom town street, looking over an evening paper which he had just bought, he heard himself hailed by name, and glancing up saw Fowler, seated in a car which was passing in the opposite direction. The valet mutely signified a wish to speak, and stopping his car, got out, and Hextall hastened to join him. They walked over to the side of the road.

"I'm on my way to Lynne Court, sir," said Fowler. "I had this wire a couple of hours ago."

He pulled out a telegram and handed it to Hextall, who immediately noted that it had been dispatched from Folkstone. It was addressed to Fowler at the flat in Queen Anne Street, and it ran:

"Get the Rolls-Royce car from the garage at once, and go down with it yourself to Lynne Court and wait there until I come.

"DARRELL TRESS."

"You see where that was sent off from, sir?" said Fowler, pointing to the postmark. "I expect they've been across at Boulogne, having a turn at the Casino. They'll be turning up at Lynne Court some time this evening."

Hextall stared at the telegram without seeing the words in it. His mind was already preoccupied. He was wondering if he ought to tell Fowler about what Ronnie Tress had told his sister. He wished he had Smith—or even Styler—at hand.

"Look here, Fowler," he said suddenly. "You've been trusted a good deal and you'll have to be trusted more. I don't know what Mr. Smith's clerk arranged with you last night——"

"Strictly confidential—for the time being, sir," said Fowler.

"Just so. I was going to continue—but I've no doubt you're aware that this is, or may be, a serious business, and everybody concerned in it will have to keep their eyes open—on behalf of the young people you're serving. You understand?"

"Quite so, sir—nobody better. I'll do my best, Doctor Hextall. Trust me!"

"Well, I've just heard something at Lynne Court that's disquieting," continued Hextall. "It may be nothing—it may be a good deal. I'll trust you with it."

He went on to tell the valet of what the boy had seen. And at the mention of Miss Brock, Fowler's eyes gleamed, and he smiled knowingly.

"Ah, just so, sir!" he exclaimed. "I'm not surprised. I've seen Kesteven and the governess talking on the quiet before now. In a big house like that, sir, where there are no end of nooks and corners, and where one's going about, sir, at odd times—messages and so on—one does come across some queer things. Oh, yes—I'm not surprised! But that shows that Kesteven has been there on the sly since he and the master left Queen Anne Street."

"Evidently," assented Hextall. He could not think of anything useful or practical that ought to be said, but some instinct made him keep Fowler waiting. "Well," he went on, after a pause, "I can't think of anything more to tell you, Fowler. Keep your eyes open—look after everything as far as you can—and be sure to wire me if you think I'm wanted. I'll see that it's made worth your while."

"That's all right, sir; rely on me," answered Fowler. "If anything goes wrong I'll let you know at once."

Hextall nodded and returned to his car and resumed his journey. More than once before he reached London he was tempted to tell the driver to turn round and go back to Lynne Court. He could easily make an excuse for his return, and he would be on the spot when Darrell Tress and his companion came back that night, as they surely would. But he was afraid of over-fussiness, afraid of exciting Kesteven's suspicions; moreover, Paquita had a capable bodyguard. In the end, he went home, wondering what would be the next development in the strange

mystery into which he had been drawn so suddenly and curiously. He would have been glad to exchange ideas with John Smith, and twice during the evening he rang him up on the telephone—once at his flat in the Adelphi, and once at his club. But Smith was neither at home nor at the club, and he got no news of him.

That night a sudden relapse on the part of a patient kept Hextall out of bed until three o'clock; consequently he slept beyond his usual hour of rising next morning. He woke to hear voices outside his bedroom door; presently, after a loud knock, it opened, and in walked John Smith. And in his hand Smith carried two telegrams.

"Your maid was just taking this in as I rode up to your door," he said, in his usual curt fashion, as he handed a buff envelope to Hextall. "So I brought it up to you. Read it—I've a pretty good idea what the contents are."

Hextall, only half awake, tore open the envelope and read. The telegram had been handed in at a village office, at eight o'clock. And what it said was:

"Kesteven was found in grounds here early this morning, shot dead.

"FOWLER."

Hextall pushed the telegram to Smith with a muttered exclamation of astonishment. But Smith glanced at it almost unconcernedly.

"From Fowler—of course," he said. "Just so! Shot dead? Quite so—but how? Now look at my

telegram, Hextall. That's from Nurse Palliser. She, you see, is more precise in her information. Look!"

He tossed the second telegram across, and Hextall, now thoroughly wide awake, took in its contents at a glance.

"Kesteven was murdered during night in Lynne Court Spinney."

CHAPTER VIII

PLAIN MURDER

HEXTALL threw the telegrams back to Smith and sprang out of bed. He was wide awake by that time, and his brain was setting furiously to work on the problem presented by this remarkable news. Out of the seething mass of ideas and impressions one resolute conviction forced itself uppermost.

"I must go down to Lynne Court at once!" he said, as he began to dress. "That's certain!"

"Your day's work?" suggested Smith. "There's that to consider."

"I know. Fortunately I can get help without difficulty—a man close by. Good heavens, Smith!—what an extraordinary development! I suppose your Nurse Palliser knows what she is wiring about?"

"If Nurse Palliser says Kesteven was murdered he was murdered," answered Smith. "She meant me to figure on that without any uncertainty as to his death resulting from suicide or accident. She's a smart woman, and she would size things up for herself in two minutes. So the next thing will be to find out—who murdered Kesteven. Look here—I'm coming with you."

"Good—good!" exclaimed Hextall, hurrying on with his dressing. "It will be a mighty relief."

"So is Styler—who is outside in a car. And as neither of us have breakfasted, I'll run down and tell your servants that we'll breakfast with you, hurriedly. We must get to Lynne Court as quickly as we can."

Left alone, Hextall was suddenly seized by a recollection which turned him hot and cold with fear. He remembered Paquita's words—words spoken in all apparent earnestness as she sat in his easy-chair, pouring out her woes to him.

"I've often been tempted to shoot him!—I could have done it once, and nobody would have ever known!"

Was it possible that something had occurred the previous evening which had made the girl desperate; and that in her desperation she had killed the man who was the cause of so much trouble? It might be—and yet there was the fact that Hextall had left her carefully watched and guarded; it seemed impossible that she could have done anything without the knowledge of the two women whom he had placed in charge of her. He ran over the wording of the telegram again. "Found shot in the grounds," said Fowler; "Murdered in Lynne Court Spinney," said Nurse Palliser, more particular. That was out of doors, away from the house. Hextall felt more cheerful after that—he could not conceive it possible that Paquita could have escaped from her nurses into the grounds at night. Nevertheless, a load of anxiety was heavy upon him all the way down to Lynne Court, and he had to confess to himself that his con-

cern for Paquita was due to the undoubted fact that he had fallen head over ears in love with her.

None of the three talked much on their journey until they came in sight of Lynne Court, perched high on its pine-clothed hill. As they turned into the village at the foot of that hill, Smith pulled up the driver.

"Look here," he said to Hextall. "Styler and I won't go up to the house with you, at present, anyway. I know this place—there's a very good wayside inn here—we'll get off at that and wait events. Go to the *Lynne Arms*," he continued, turning to the driver. "We'll stop there."

In front of the inn they saw Fowler, talking to a police-inspector in uniform. He came quickly forward on seeing Hextall, and opened the door of the car.

"Glad you've come, sir," he said. "I've just sent you another wire—from Miss Tress. She wanted you to come down."

"Is Miss Tress all right?" asked Hextall.

"She's all right, sir—upset, of course. The whole place is upset. I've just sent a wire at the same time from Mr. Tress to his solicitors, asking one of them to come at once and to bring a detective. But as I was saying to the inspector here, I think it'll take a good many detectives to settle this affair!"

"Hextall," said Smith, "I think we had better go into the inn and hear what Fowler has to tell. Perhaps the inspector will come with us? Now," he continued, a little later, when all five men were closeted

in a private parlour, "supposing you give us the main facts of what has occurred, Fowler? I imagine that you're in possession of them?"

Fowler, who had exchanged a few words in private with Styler, looked at Smith with a respectful interest.

"Yes, I know what's happened, sir," he answered.

"What you might call the plain facts of it, sir—on the surface, as it were. But there's a deal behind that, sir!"

"Give us the plain facts, if you please," said Smith.

"Well, sir, it was like this," responded Fowler. "I arrived at Lynne Court about seven o'clock last night, to wait for Mr. Tress coming home. About ten o'clock he came. Mr. Kesteven was with him. They'd driven in a car from Brighton; I made out from the driver that they'd been dining at the Hotel Metropole there. And they'd brought Mr. Tickell with them."

"Who," asked Smith, "is Mr. Tickell?"

"Mr. Maurice Tickell, sir. I can't say—exactly. He's a gentleman who has been to Mr. Tress's flat in Queen Anne Street, but I don't think he's ever been down here before."

The inspector put in a word.

"He hasn't," he said. "I got that fact out of the butler. It was the first time Mr. Tickell had been to Lynne Court."

Smith signed to Fowler to proceed.

"Well, sir," continued Fowler, with a shake of his head, "Mr. Tress, sir, he'd evidently been dining rather freely—you understand? I took him straight

off to bed; he's always quite manageable under those circumstances, sir, quite—never quarrelsome nor noisy, and when I'd seen that he was perfectly safe, and sound asleep, I let Miss Tress's nurses know that he'd come back—I thought Miss Tress had better know."

"Did they call her?" asked Hextall.

"Yes, sir; Nurse Palliser told her. And that Mr. Kesteven and Mr. Tickell were there; I thought she'd better know everything. I waited outside Miss Tress's rooms while Nurse Palliser told her. Nurse Palliser said she was all right about it when she heard that Mr. Tress had gone to sleep. So then I went down. Mr. Mountain—that's the butler, sir—told me the other two had gone into the billiard-room and had had sandwiches and whiskey-and-soda sent in to them. I took a look at them—for my own satisfaction. They were playing pool."

"Both sober?" asked Smith.

Fowler looked at Hextall with a knowing smile.

"I never knew either of them anything else, sir," he answered. "Mr. Kesteven was too smart even to indulge in that way, and I never saw Mr. Tickell drink anything much very. No; they were just amusing themselves, and eating their sandwiches in between, like. And they were still there, in the billiard-room; not playing, but sitting and smoking, when Mr. Mountain went his rounds for the night. Mr. Kesteven said to him that he needn't wait up, as he'd turn out the lights. That was a thing that had often happened before—he'd a trick of sitting up late, had Kesteven,

both here and at the flat. So Mountain went to bed. And when he got up in the morning—six o'clock—he found the billiard-room lights still on, and one of the French windows opening on to the lawn, was unfastened——”

“Unfastened—or a little way open?” asked Smith.

“It was a little ajar, sir; I saw it myself a few minutes later, because Mountain called my attention to it. I'd got up earlier than usual, and I'd just taken a look at Mr. Tress who was fast asleep, and had then gone down to get a cup of early tea, when Mountain called me in to the billiard-room to show me. He's a bit of a fidget about things like that, is Mountain. It was while we were standing at the billiard-room window that one of the gardeners waved to us across the lawn, from the edge of the spinney. We could see he was in a state about something, and after he'd waved his arm he started running to us and we went out to meet him. He's a man who lives in one of the cottages at the edge of the park, just outside the village here, and he comes across the spinney to his work every morning. We could see that something had given him a turn, and he blurted it all out as he came up. 'There's a gentleman lying dead in the spinney yonder!' he says. 'It's Mr. Kesteven. And there's blood on his face!' So then Mountain and I hurried off with him, and he took us straight to the spot—a bit of a clearing where there's a rustic seat. Kesteven was lying at the side of it, and he was dead sure enough, and cold and stiff. We saw at once how he'd

been killed—shot through the temples. And so we took proper precautions.”

“Of what nature?” asked Smith.

“Mountain sent the gardener for the police and the doctor from the village, and he stopped by the body while I went into the house to tell Mr. Tress and Mr. Tickell,” answered Fowler. “As I knew Mr. Tress would be a bit heavy at that time of the morning, I went to Mr. Tickell’s room first. And he wasn’t there!”

The police-inspector, who had followed Fowler’s narrative with approving interest, coughed, shook his head and smiled. It was evident that he had drawn his own conclusions from the fact just mentioned by the valet.

“He wasn’t there,” repeated Fowler, “and his bed hadn’t been slept in. But I noticed one thing at once—couldn’t help noticing it. He’d washed and shaved himself before he went off!”

“Washed—shaved!” exclaimed Smith. “What—during the night?”

“Night, or early morning, sir, whenever it was,” answered Fowler. “He’d only brought a small suitcase with him, had Mr. Tickell, and it was lying there open in his room. His shaving things were on the dressing-table, and he hadn’t even bothered to clean the razor. I saw all that in a glance, as you might say, sir, and I shut the room up and locked it, and——”

“I hope nobody has interfered with it since?” said Smith.

The police-inspector held up a key. "They havn't, sir," he observed solemnly, "I've seen to that. It's untouched since the time Mr. Fowler saw it."

"Go on, Fowler," commanded Smith, "What did you do next?"

"I roused the footmen, sir, and we went back to the spinney; I'd decided by that time not to wake Mr. Tress for a bit. Nurse Palliser came out of Miss Tress's rooms as I was passing, and I told her what had occurred. She went to the spinney with us. Of course we looked about us, but we didn't touch the body nor do anything until the doctor and the police came. When they came, a bit later, they took charge. And I dare say," concluded Fowler, with a glance at his companion, "the inspector can tell you the rest better than I can."

The listeners turned silently to the inspector, and the inspector's demeanour became important.

"I've no objection to telling what's already common property, gentlemen," he observed. "But, of course, I can't at this stage say what the whole of my own deductions and impressions are, though I don't mind indicating them. We found the body at the place, and in the position described by Mr. Fowler there, and the doctor said he judged the man had been dead some hours. At first, we thought it was a case of suicide, but we soon saw that it wasn't, because there was no weapon at hand. A man can't shoot himself and get rid of the revolver, and this man had been killed instantaneously. We had the body removed, and I had the clearing roped off and left a man in charge of it.

Then the doctor and I examined the body. He can tell you what he found, and I can tell what I found. I found nothing! Not a sign of a thing—beyond a pocket handkerchief and a pair of nail scissors.”

“Well?” remarked Smith calmly. “What next?”

The inspector seemed grieved that his dramatic announcement had produced no effect.

“Well, there was nothing exactly next, as regards the body,” he replied, a little grudgingly. “The next thing was that one of the footmen came to tell me that a bicycle belonging to Mr. Tress had disappeared during the night. And, of course, I saw then how things were. Naturally! And as a result we’ve raised a hue and cry after this Mr. Tickell. We ought to be on to him by night.”

“Ah!” said Smith, rising from his chair, “You think Tickell is the murderer?”

“I do!” answered the inspector, doggedly. “We shall swing him!”

Smith nodded quietly. Then he signed to Hextall and Styler to follow him from the room.

CHAPTER IX

THE SHAVING-POT

THE barrister led the way into the open village street, and turned up it in the direction of the gates of Lynne Court. He was evidently in deep thought, and neither of his companions interrupted his meditations until he suddenly swung his small figure round to them.

"Hextall!" he said. "The first thing we must do is to get on a proper footing. By this time young Tress must surely be sobered. We will walk up to the house. You must see him and tell him that learning of this, and being concerned for his sister's health, you hurried down and brought a friend with you who may be of use. In the meantime, you Styler—but come here, and I'll give you your instructions."

He took the clerk aside and held a brief consultation with him, at the end of which Styler turned back to the inn. Smith rejoined Hextall; together, the two walked quickly up to Lynne Court through the pine woods.

Darrell Tress came hurrying out on the terrace to meet them. Smith, sizing him up, quickly muttered an aside to his companion.

"This chap is easy to read," he said. "Weak—good-natured—very easily led—naturally, utterly dependent on somebody else. He's as pleased as Punch

to see us; he knows we shall take responsibility off his shoulders. I know this type of youngster, and I should say that the finest thing that ever happened in his career was when somebody put that bullet through Kesteven this morning. Hextall!—we must try to pull this fellow round, and make him a decent member of society.”

Darrell's pleasure and relief at sight of Hextall were obvious enough. He shook hands with more than necessary warmth, welcoming him as a man who has been shipwrecked might welcome a rescuer.

“Oh, I say, I'm awfully obliged to you for coming, doctor!” he burst out, without ceremony, and evidently quite ignorant as to what means had been taken to bring Hextall there. “It's such a relief to have somebody here—I've sent for my solicitor and told him to bring a detective, but they can't get here just yet. Of course, the local police are on the job, but——”

“This is my friend, Mr. John Smith, of the Middle Temple,” said Hextall, drawing Smith forward. “Mr. Smith is interested in matters of this sort, and he may be useful to you.”

Darrell shook hands with Smith in the same effusive fashion.

“It's tremendously good of you!” he protested. “I'm no end obliged. Of course, we're all at sixes and sevens here, but the police have already circulated reports about that chap Tickell, so——”

“You think that Tickell shot Kesteven?” interrupted Smith.

“Why, certainly I do!” answered Darrell. “Who else? You see, I know scarcely anything about Tickell—he’s only a chap that I’d seen on race-courses, and so on—Kesteven introduced him—and sometimes he’d been at my flat, playing cards. I’m afraid I’ve been an awful ass, don’t you know, about that sort of thing, but this has given me a shock, by gad! and I’ll chuck it, I will indeed, by gad! and reform, and so on, you know. And, I say, I’ve not told the police yet, but do you know, Kesteven had a lot of money on him last night—piles!—and they tell me that when they searched him this morning his pockets were empty, by George—empty! You see, Hextall, we’d been over to Boulogne for a day or two, Kesteven and I, and we had a most tremendous run of luck—extraordinary!—and we brought a lot of money back with us, and Kesteven, last night, had both mine and his in his pockets—gad!—there’d be five or six thousand pounds in bank-notes, French and English. And we picked up Tickell at Brighton, where we stopped to dine, and he came on with us here, and, by George! the scoundrel killed poor old Kesteven for that coin, I’ll swear he did! But he can’t have got very far, can he? and surely somebody’ll lay hands on him—and won’t you come and see the place where he shot him, by George!—the mean hound!”

Hextall left Smith to accompany the young master of Lynne Court and went into the house and straight to Paquita’s room. Outside there he met Nurse Paliser.

“Anything to tell me?” he asked, taking her aside.

"Nothing, sir," she answered readily. "Miss Tress had a very good night, and she's very well this morning. Of course, she never knew anything about this affair until we told her. She was shocked at first, but she seems in quite good spirits now."

Hextall heard this with immense relief, and he lingered a moment.

"Did you hear anything of this business?" he asked. "Any shot, for instance?"

"Nothing," she replied. "We had a very quiet night. Miss Tress was disturbed when she heard that the three gentlemen had come, but she quietened down when Fowler told her that Mr. Tress was sound asleep in bed. Nurse Hicks slept in the little drawing-room next to Miss Tress, and she says they had a particularly good night—Miss Tress slept right through it."

"That's good," said Hextall. "I shall tell her that she must remain in her own rooms to-day; she mustn't go down stairs at all. See to that."

Then he went into Paquita's sitting-room—to find her at an open window stitching busily at some fancy work. She sprang up with a glad cry as he entered and came hastily to meet him, and Hextall could not forbear holding her hand rather longer than was professionally necessary.

"Here already!" she exclaimed. "But I have only just wired to you."

"I heard the news first thing this morning and came at once," said Hextall, taking her back to her chair. "I was afraid—for you."

Paquita folded her hands in her lap and shook her head.

"I—I don't quite know what I think," she said thoughtfully. "I can't truthfully say I'm sorry. I suppose I am, in one way, poor man. But—was it very wrong? When they told me that he was dead, I—I felt such a tremendous sense of relief. You don't know—not even you, though I've told you so much—what a nightmare that man had been. I know he was literally ruining Darrell, body and soul! And Darrell's been in here this morning, and he's fearfully repentant about everything, and he says it's given him a shock, and pulled him up, and he's sworn faithfully that he'll reform and be—oh, ever so good—and you'll tell me how to help, won't you?" she wound up, with a look of appeal that made Hextall more in love with her than ever. "I'm sure he means it—this time."

"I'll help," said Hextall. "There's the chief obstacle gone, anyway."

"Yes," she answered. "It—it seems almost providential, doesn't it? Do you remember what I said to you when I came to your house that night?—that I'd more than once felt that I could shoot him? Well, isn't it strange?—last night I dreamt that I did shoot him—somewhere in a wood—it was all confused and queer—but I recollect vividly that I did shoot him, and saw him fall, and his face after he fell——"

"Don't recall it!" said Hextall, peremptorily. "That came from your thinking so much about all these things. Put them out of your mind, now."

"Yes," she promised, "I will. But wasn't it strange that I should dream that on the very night that he was shot? I suppose I'd gone to sleep thinking about him being in the house. Do you think they will catch that dreadful man who shot him? Oh, you can't think how thankful I am!—Darrell has promised me solemnly—most solemnly!—that he'll never have any more of that sort here again. He's going to make a clear sweep of all that sort of thing, and he thinks he'll turn to politics and go into Parliament instead."

Hextall let Paquita talk until he thought that she had talked enough. He gave strict orders as to her doings for that day, delighted her by telling her that he was not returning to town until late in the evening, and possibly not until next day, and left her in charge of the nurses. Going through the house on his way to rejoin Smith, he encountered the boy Ronnie and his governess and stopped to speak to them. But he gave little more than a seeming attention to the child; what he wanted was a good look at Miss Brock, in view of what Paquita had told him the previous day. Miss Brock, however, was not inclined to linger, and she drew back into the shadow of the somewhat gloomy corridor in which they met. But Hextall's sharp, professional eye saw dark circles under Miss Brock's eyes, and drawn lines about her mouth, and in spite of the gloom, the pallor on her cheeks was very apparent, and he drew his own conclusions.

"That girl knows something," he thought, as he left the house and went off to find Smith. "She looks the sort, too, to keep her knowledge to herself. Odd!

—if Kesteven was with Tress at Boulogne, how could the boy have seen him here, talking to the governess, that night? He must have been mistaken—and yet Paquita seemed to have no doubt that he had seen them together. However, that's a matter that can be quickly cleared up—when it's necessary."

He found Darrell and Smith in the spinney, at the scene of the murder. There was nothing to show that any tragedy had taken place at the spot—a small clearing in the heart of the pine wood, in the centre of which stood a rustic seat. There were no signs of any struggle, no trampling of the grass, nothing had been left there. But round the clearing the police had placed a rope, and a constable was on guard to prevent trespass. Smith shook his head as Hextall came up.

"Nothing to see there," he said. "Nothing! Not a mark—except a little blood on a few blades of grass. It's an odd thing, though, seeing how near this spot is to the house, that nobody heard the shot. I make it to be about two hundred yards from here to the west wing—now, the sound of a revolver fired in the silence of the night would carry a lot further than that. And that makes me wonder if Kesteven was really shot here, or if he was brought here after he was killed. That man there," he continued, indicating the constable, "has been describing the position in which the body was lying when they found it, and according to my theories, which are based on evidence, that position was not exactly consistent with sudden, instantaneous death. A man shot through the brain

falls in a certain way which I will explain to you later—now, this body had not fallen in that way. But we'll go into all that at another time; I see the police-inspector there, and I'd like to get that key from him and have a look at the room in which this man Tickell left his things."

The police-inspector was only too willing to play cicerone to the bed-room which Fowler had carefully locked up, but he insisted that nothing should be touched until his own superiors from the county town and the expected detective from London had made their own examination.

"Everything is just as we found it, gentlemen," he said, as he ushered Hextall and Smith into the room. "And Mr. Fowler assures me that nothing had been interfered with up to then—it was exactly as the man left it. And he didn't leave much, as you can see."

Hextall certainly saw little. On a stand at the foot of the bed lay a small suit-case, thrown open. It appeared to contain nothing more than linen and toilet articles. On the dressing-table lay a razor—uncleaned since using; near it was a china shaving-pot. Into this Smith peered curiously, and he suddenly lifted his round face and smiled.

"That's what I wanted to know!" he said. "It's rather illuminating. The gentleman left his moustache behind him. See?"

"You mustn't touch anything, sir!" said the inspector warningly. "Not an article must be moved, or——"

"We're not going to touch as much as a pin, my friend," said Smith soothingly. "People who can use their eyes don't need to finger things. Do you see, Hextall? Tickell evidently shaved off his moustache—a small black one—and washed the individual hairs off the razor into this shaving-pot. However, you also see that he left a few sticking to the razor—and I see a few more on that towel. Now what do you deduce from that, officer?" he went on, turning with an arch smile to the inspector. "Of course, you'd notice it, eh?"

"No, I hadn't particularly noticed that," answered the inspector. "But my own common sense told me that if a man comes to this room and shaves himself after committing a murder, he goes away clean-shaven. And it's for a clean-shaven man that we've sent out our inquires. They all forget some detail, these chaps—this fellow did for himself when he left that shaving-tackle lying about."

"You think he shaved himself after he shot his man?" said Smith innocently.

The inspector did not trouble to answer that question, except with a look. He showed the two visitors out, locked the door again, and went off. And Smith, when he was out of sight, drew Hextall into the deep window-place.

"I did finger something after all, though neither of you noticed it," he said. "Look here!"

He held up to his companion's gaze a tiny scrap of some filmy white stuff, which looked to Hextall to be no more than a bit of rag.

CHAPTER X

A LADY COMES: A LADY GOES

“Do you know what that is?” asked Smith, with a sly laugh. “You don’t? Then I’ll tell you. It’s a bit of gauze that has formed the wrapping of a false moustache. Mr. Maurice Tickell, whoever he may be, went away from here, not clean-shaven, as our worthy official friend yonder imagines, but wearing an adornment on the upper lip of a different shape and of a slightly different colour to that which usually characterized it. And that, my dear Hextall, makes me certain that the Tickell individual did not murder John Kesteven, doesn’t know who did murder him, and is in ignorance at this moment—unless some early edition of the afternoon papers has informed him—that Kesteven’s is dead. Do you follow that?”

“My mind is not quite as subtle as yours, Smith,” answered Hextall. “I don’t!”

“More than one wise man has told us that probability is the guide of life,” remarked Smith. “I attach much importance in all these cases to what is probable—I am very sceptical, impatient even, of what is improbable. Now, our friend the police-inspector has formed the theory, based on what Tress has told him about Kesteven having all that money on his person, that Tickell lured Kesteven out into the grounds, shot him dead two hundred yards away from

the house, in which some sixteen or twenty persons were then in bed, some of them no doubt asleep, but some of them awake or light sleepers, robbed his victim, came back to the house, shaved off his moustache, appropriated a bicycle, and vanished. Bosh!"

"And what do you think happened—in reality?" asked Hextall.

"I think that Kesteven and Tickell were in all likelihood hand-in-glove with each other in some scheme or other, more or less nefarious and questionable. I think they sat up late purposely, discussing their business. I think that business, whatever it may have been, necessitated the immediate disappearance of Tickell, under a slight disguise. Mind you—*en passant*—a slight, a very slight disguise, is much more effectual than an elaborate, over-loaded one. An upward twist to a moustache—the wearing of a slightly pointed instead of a rounded beard—these are artistic touches which your adept in make-up knows the value of. But I pass on—Tickell made that slight alteration in his appearance hurriedly—Kesteven no doubt being with him. Then Kesteven took him to the room where the bicycles are kept—there are several there—Tickell selected one. Kesteven then showed him a near cut through the grounds and the spinney to the high-road. And after that Kesteven went—somewhere. There he was shot—and the body was brought to where it was found. Eh?"

"In that case," observed Hextall, "the murderer is somewhere at hand—within a close circle."

"Just so. The murderer is—or was—close at hand, probably is, just now. Kesteven doubtless went somewhere—close by—to keep an appointment, even at that hour, which was probably between twelve and one o'clock in the morning. And so there are two lines to take. One Styler is following now—making himself acquainted with what we may call the ethnography of this immediate neighborhood—getting to know who all the people are who live about here and so on—the other is that which he started on when he'd had his interview with Fowler at your house—that is, finding out who Kesteven really was. Of course the coroner, and his jury, and the police authorities will want to know who Kesteven was, and all about him. I don't think Darrel Tress can tell much—probably Tickell can, and will tell more."

"When he's found," said Hextall.

"Oh!" remarked Smith indifferently. "Tickell will be found within forty-eight hours—unless, indeed, he got clear of the country early this morning, as he might do. My notion is that Tickell probably carried away some of the money which Tress says Kesteven had on him. Whoever Tickell may be, I'm sorry for him, for he'll probably hang for this—even as the inspector so kindly prophesied."

"You think so!—in spite of believing him innocent?" exclaimed Hextall.

"I do! Especially if the gentleman—as is likely—has a bad record, and a shady character. Take the circumstances into consideration—as if you were a British juryman. Look at them carefully —pooh,

Tickell won't have a cat's chance—not he! He'll hang, however innocent he may be, on the damning evidence which the police will bring against him. My dear fellow, police, officialdom, and the public love to see the superficial and the obvious successful. In this case a man hooks it in the dead of night, slightly disguised, under highly suspicious circumstances, leaving a murdered man behind him, carrying, probably, some of that murdered man's money on him—why, of course he's guilty—who else? 'You were the first person we suspected; therefore, you are guilty,' says everybody. 'We suspected you at once—and we don't want to suspect anybody else!' Therefore, Tickell will hang."

Just then a footman came along to announce lunch, and Hextall and Smith went downstairs—to find Darrell Tress in conversation with a lady whom he presently introduced as Mrs. Renton, a neighbour. Mrs. Renton, a pretty, clever-looking woman of apparently thirty to thirty-five, gave the two strangers a quick, critical inspection, and fastened on Hextall as the four sat down to lunch.

"I came round to see if I could be of any use to Miss Tress," she said. "Miss Tress tells me that she is in your hands, Dr. Hextall, so I must apply to you, I suppose? Can I see her?"

Hextall, in virtue of his position as medical adviser, felt himself justified in taking a good look at his questioner. Mrs. Renton, he decided, was a woman of some character, evidently shrewd, self-reliant, and forceful; her smart gown, her obvious self-possession,

her entire air suggested that she was a thorough woman of the world. She looked at Hextall with a frank inquiry, which somehow managed at the same time to convey to him that she knew well how things had stood in that house. And Hextall entered into the freemasonry of her glance.

"I think so," he responded. "Providing you don't talk to Miss Tress too long, and no more than's necessary about the event of this morning—which means—no more than a mere reference to it."

"Oh, of course!" exclaimed Mrs. Renton. "I came to talk to her about anything but that. I dare say we shall all hear enough about that later on—officially. The newspapers, you know."

"Too much!" muttered Darrell. He was evidently beginning his promised course of reformation; for in common with his two men guests, he had declined the champagne which his butler had offered, and was drinking whiskey and potash-water instead. Hextall noticed the effect which even this comparatively innocent compound had on him—his hand became steadier, his eye clearer, and his voice more under control—and he knew what had led his host to the excesses of which he had heard so much. Darrell Tress was evidently of a highly neurotic temperament; nerves had driven him to drink—and there was time enough for him to be cured, said Hextall, with a resolve to attempt a cure. "Too much," he repeated, glancing at the windows of his dining-room. "I'm expecting to see the place overrun with reporters be-

fore the day's out. Why can't all these things be kept quiet?"

"Because we live in an age which is very much concerned about anything that happens on somebody else's doorstep," said Smith. "Privacy is impossible—even if you want to kill your dearest friend."

Mrs. Renton looked scrutinizingly at Smith, who sat opposite to her. Smith responded to her gaze with one of his innocent and bland expressions.

"You think there is no privacy nowadays?" she asked.

"On the contrary," replied Smith, "I think there never was such a time for privacy. This is the age of privacy. Once upon a time I could not have lunched with you, for instance, unless I had known who your grandfather was; nowadays, I am not at all concerned to know if your mother once took in washing. Privacy came in when pedigrees went out."

"You are a gentleman of paradoxical bad habits," said Mrs. Renton. "You said just now that privacy is impossible in this age."

"Quite so," replied Smith. "It is my custom to say one thing at one time and another at another time. The only man who ever speaks the truth is the man who keeps up a custom of persistent self-contradiction. Besides, I was not thinking of what you were thinking—I was thinking, in the first case, of privacy in doing, in the second, of privacy in being. Do you see the difference?"

"I believe you're pulling my leg," answered Mrs. Renton. "But perhaps you're only a metaphysician on the spree—is that it?"

"Excellent!" murmured Smith. "I have a fine appreciation of your meaning."

Darrell Tress looked at Hextall and smiled. He had a vague notion that his lady guest and this fat little man from London were both wits, and beyond him, and he began to chatter to the doctor about matters which were more in his line—sport, racing, cricket. He was obviously relieved when they all rose, and Mrs. Renton, with Hextall's permission, went off to see Paquita.

"Come into the billiard-room and have a cigar," he said. "Clever woman that, eh?" he went on as he led the other two into a magnificently appointed billiard-room, and threw himself into a chair. "Top-hole talker, isn't she?"

"Charming woman," agreed Smith. "Neighbour of yours, I think you said?"

"Lives just across the woods there, at a place called the Warren," answered Darrell. "Nice place. Young widow, Mrs. Renton. She's only been here once before, and we've only been at her place once. I think it was very kind of her to come across, don't you? You see, we scarcely know anybody hereabouts. However, we'll change all that, we will, by gad! I—good Lord, I never noticed!"

He suddenly bounced out of the chair into which he had dropped, gave it a look of disgust, and sank into another.

"That!" he remarked in a low voice. "That's the chair he—Kesteven—always sat in! Wouldn't have any other when he was in here—I'll have it taken away."

"Don't!" said Smith. "At any rate, not now. I'll sit in it—very good judge of comfortable chairs the poor man was, too," he went on, seating himself. "By the by, now that Mrs. Renton has left us, perhaps we three may talk a little, especially as I may have to return to town. As Hextall told you, Mr. Tress, I am greatly interested in criminal matters, and fairly what I may call learned in them, and if my experience is any help to you, you're welcome to it. Now, I suppose you're aware that the coroner will open an inquest on Kesteven's body?—probably to-morrow."

"The police fellows told me that," answered Darrell. "I suppose I'll have to go?"

"You'll certainly have to go, for you'll be the most important witness," replied Smith. "The great thing that will have to be gone into in this case is—who really was John Kesteven? I don't suppose you know—but you know something. Don't tell us now what you know or don't know—they'll get all that out of you. But there is one question which I'd like to ask you," continued Smith, to whom Hextall had during the ride down confided the story about Ronnie's vision of Miss Brock and Kesteven, "and it's this—you told us that you and Kesteven had been over to Boulogne during the past few days. Well—was Kesteven with you the whole of that time?"

"No," replied Darrell, promptly. "He wasn't. He left me for twenty-four hours—to go to London on business. Went off at noon one day and was back at noon the next. It was while he was off," he continued, with a chuckle, "that I had my tremendous run of luck! Gad! you never knew such luck," he went on, showing a nervous desire to talk of anything but the matter in point. "I won all before me at every sitting, Kesteven said——"

"Excuse me," broke in Smith, unceremoniously interrupting him, "but this matter of Kesteven's absence is important to what I want to find out on your behalf. You say Kesteven was away twenty-four hours—left at noon one day, got back at noon the next. That is, he would return by the morning boat from Folkstone."

"He did," replied Darrell; "I met him."

The butler just then came into the billiard-room and looked at his master with an evident desire to speak to him. Darrell went across to the door, and Smith leaned over to Hextall.

"The youngster's story to his sister was right, you see," he whispered. "Of course, Kesteven would have plenty of time to go to London, come here, and get back to Boulogne in twenty-four hours. The thing is—what was the connexion between him and the governess, Miss Brock? We'll have to go into that."

Darrell came back from his colloquy with Mountain, pulling a face of vexation and surprise.

"I say!" he exclaimed. "Hanged if there isn't another mystery! Miss Brock has disappeared!"

Hextall and Smith jumped to their feet with a glance at each other. And Smith's glance was one of warning.

"That's your little brother's governess?" he asked, turning to Darrell. "You don't mean that she has really disappeared—unaccountably?"

"They can't find her anywhere about the place, anyhow," replied Darrell. "She came in from a walk with Ronnie at twelve o'clock, handed him over to a groom who's teaching him to ride a pony, went up to her own room, and has never been seen since. The servants have been seeking her everywhere, and can't find her. You see, she never came down when dinner was served for her and Ronnie, and the footman who went up to her door couldn't get any reply. In fact, the door of the room is locked now, but the house-keeper has been in through the window, which opens on balcony. And she tells Mountain that the room's all in confusion. I say!—suppose we go and have a look at it?"

He led the way upstairs, and Hextall and Smith followed. Smith jogged his friend's arm.

"I knew there'd be a plenitude of mystery down here," he muttered. "Now, if that ferret-like clerk of mine is only half as busy as I am, Hextall, we shall have plenty to talk about when to-day's done."

CHAPTER XI

THE CABBAGE PLANTER

STYLER, after parting company with his master at the gates of Lynne Court, went back to the inn. As he approached it he saw Fowler and the police-inspector leave it and stroll down the village street; the landlord, following them out, stood in the porch, staring about him as he reflectively scratched his bare arms. He recognized the clerk as one of the party which had just held a conference in his private parlour, and he nodded affably. Styler responded with cordiality; a village landlord was just the sort of man he wanted at that moment.

"If there's one thing in the world that I fancy at this particular juncture," remarked Styler, "it's a tankard of that cool ale that you've of course got in your cellar. How are you feeling yourself in that way?"

The landlord recognized a sociable and affable spirit, and showed Styler back into the room which he had left ten minutes before. He fetched a foaming jug of ale and two glasses, and nudged his customer solemnly.

"Come down about this affair at the Court, I reckon?" he said eyeing Styler's sharp countenance. "Law gentleman, no doubt?"

"Something of that sort," answered Styler, as he rolled a cigarette. "Queer business, ain't it?"

"Ah!" agreed the landlord. "You're right! A business as'll not be got to the bottom of in a hurry. At least, that's what I think from what I've heard of it from the inspector and Mr. Fowler yonder. Maybe you know more?"

"No more than you do," replied Styler.

The landlord dropped into a chair and relighted the stump of a cigar. He was evidently disposed to talk, and Styler was pleased to see it.

"Looks like as if this feller as rode off in the night done it," observed the landlord. "Must ha'done it—nobody else for it."

"It couldn't have been poachers now, could it?" suggested Styler.

The landlord smiled derisively.

"We ain't none hereabouts!" he remarked. "Poachers!—there's nought to poach—on the Tress's property, anyway. "Tain't a game estate, that—old Mr. Tress, the uncle, what had it before this young gentleman, he wasn't one for sport—all his tastes was for flowers, and rare plants and trees, and such-like. Fine gardens and grounds, and a well-laid-out park, but not much in the game line—few partridges, and a hare or two, but naught worth what you'd call a proper poacher's attention. No, sir—that there man wasn't put an end to by any of our folk."

"I expect you know everybody in the place?" observed Styler. "Not so many to know, is there?"

"I know every man Jack of 'em in Lynne," answered the landlord. "And every woman and child, too. It's a small place, as you say—we've no

strangers here. That is, 'cepting a young widow lady as took the Warren not so long since, and an old gent as has just come down to a furnished cottage up in the woods. Them's the only two—Mrs. Renton the young widow's name is, and the old chap's called Mr. Pegge—that wasn't born and bred here. And you wouldn't look to a fine young widow lady, nor yet to an old gentleman, to go about in our woods at night with revolvers, a-shooting of folks, would you now? No, sir, 'tain't no Lynne folks as done that murder!—if it ain't him—Tickell—as they're after, then it is a mystery, and no error!”

“To be sure,” said Styler heartily. “Young widow you say? Pretty woman?”

“Uncommon,” replied the landlord. “Fine woman—a lady. No great establishment, you understand, but enough—two or three maids and a page-boy.”

“It's a queer thing,” observed Styler, insinuating with a look that he was quite sure that the landlord was a man of the world, “and I dare say you've noticed it, that these young widows invariably bury themselves in what you might call the truly rural—where there is nobody that they could make a second attempt with, as it were. Queer, ain't it?”

“Well, I don't know,” replied the landlord sagaciously. “You see, that's when the first year or so's on; they like to get where it's shady, to reflect on things. But I'll tell you what,” he continued, with a wink, “I've always noticed that a period of reflection like that gives 'em an appetite for a second husband—yes!”

"This lady making any attempt that way?" asked Styler.

"Nay, I can't say that we've noticed aught," answered the landlord. "She's a quietish sort—spends her time a good deal in the garden and such-like. We've no marrying gentleman about here, neither; it's a poor country for that. Of course, there's Mr. Tress—but this here Mrs. Renton is a bit too old for him—she's the sort that 'ud do well for a middle-aged gentleman. You understand—something like that gov'nor of yours that was in here just now."

"Ah!" said Styler. "No doubt. I understand what you mean. Look well at the head of a rich man's table, eh? I'll tell him to keep his eyes open."

"Law gentleman, that, I reckon?" observed the landlord inquisitively. "I thought as much when I see you drive up to the door. I said to my missis, 'One of these here lawyers,' I says. 'There'll be a deal o' that sort down here over this affair.' Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody some good, as they say, and I expect this do 'll put money in pockets like yours, young man?"

"Not if I sit here all the morning," answered Styler. He drank off his ale, remarked that he should look in a bit later for a mouthful of lunch, and went out into the village. The folk who saw him there might have fancied that he had no aim or object, for he did no more than look into the windows of the two or three shops, stroll round the yew-shaded churchyard, and linger by the open door of the school, presumably to listen to the hum of juvenile voices

within. But Styler had an object of his own, and he pursued it in his own fashion. He had already found out that in that small community there were only two persons whose antecedents were not common property—an old gentleman and a young lady; he meant to have a look at both of them. And having kept his eyes open as he strolled around, and duly noticed, from a slight eminence by the churchyard, that in the woodlands near Lynne Court there stood one largish house and one smallish one, he betook himself to those woodlands by various narrow lanes and paths. For intuition and deduction—both strong qualities with Styler—told him that the large house must be the Warren, and the small one the furnished cottage, both referred to by the landlord of the *Lynne Arms*, and he desired to take closer look at them and to see their inmates. All this was part of his—and of John Smith's—plan. If something unusual has occurred in a district, the first thing to do is to make yourself acquainted with the folk who live in that district, and to consider whether they are likely or not to have had any concern with what has happened—for, as Styler never wearied of telling himself, you never know who anybody is until you have turned them inside-out, and you cannot be too careful about small details. His ears had pricked on hearing of this young widow and this old gentleman—they, after all, were not native-born of Lynne, and they must be seen to.

He found the Warren to be of an eminently commonplace, snug, thoroughly respectable nature. It was a modern, stone-built house—one of those new-

fashioned erections now so fashionable in the southern counties, evidently built by some person who had designed it for a resort after a retirement from the pursuit of a highly successful business. It had many gables and more chimneys, and odd windows, and nooks and corners, a timbered front, and much mural ornamentation of ivy and clematis and Virginia creeper; its lawns were trim and its gardens formal; it was just the sort of place in which you would expect to find the course of life run with great smoothness, and have a perfectly-cooked dinner served up punctually at seven-thirty to the minute. A neat maid was talking to the butcher's boy at a side-gate as Styler passed; he knew by the dilated eyes of both that their subject of conversation was the event of the night. But of the maid's mistress he saw nothing at that time.

The other object of his attention—the cottage—was of a quite different nature to the Warren. It stood literally in the woods, in a clearing, and Styler, who had drawn near to it by boldly forsaking the trodden ways and betaking himself, Indian fashion, to the thickets, was able to approach it under cover of the fresh, luxuriant foliage which a week of warm spring weather had brought into being. He heard vocal sounds—gentle, pastoral sounds—as he crept up behind a privet hedge which ringed in the cottage-garden. And taking good care to make no sound himself, he peered through the interstices of the glossy leafage, and saw, not many yards away, an elderly gentleman, who was engaged in planting cab-

bage, and was enlivening his task with snatches of cheery song.

He was a nice-looking old gentleman this—as innocent-looking an old party as you could come across in a long day's march, affirmed Styler, communing with himself after his usual fashion. Just then Styler could not see his face—what he saw was a back view of a pair of comfortable, roomy, shepard's plaid trousers, a gaily striped shirt, a pair of still gayer silk braces, and the back of a big Panama hat. The person inside of all these things had his back to the hedgerow and to the watcher concealed behind it, and his face to the cottage at the other side of the garden. He had a rush basket on one side of him, filled with cabbage plants; in his right hand he carried an instrument which gardeners call a dibble; with this dibble he made holes in the earth at regular intervals; when he had made a dozen or so of these holes he carefully inserted a cabbage plant in each hole and with equal care earthed it up. And as he occupied himself in this way, he sang snatches of old ditties of a rural and pastoral sort in a jocund, mellifluous voice, a little cracked, thought Styler, but still very tuneful.

"Quiet, peaceful old duffer, this!" soliloquized the spy. "Don't seem to be no sin nor malice in his old carcase, anyway. The idea, now, of a chap planting cabbages or turnips or onions, or whatever those things are, in such what you might call serene fashion, when a bloody murder's just happened at his very

door! Wonderful, I call it!—I reckon this old party is a philosopher.”

He turned his attention from the old party to the old party's cottage. It was a nice little place, a sort of bungalow, half brick, half plaster, with a verandah under projecting eaves and a pergola of rambler roses running from the door to the gate. Through an open window Styler got a glimpse of a pleasant interior—pictures, books, a table laid with a white cloth, of silver and glass gleaming on the linen. And just as he had seen that, a woman of the char-lady variety came to the door and called to the cabbage-planter.

“Your dinner's ready, Mr. Pegge,” she announced. “Shall I draw some ale, sir?”

“An excellent suggestion, Mrs. Ridd,” replied Mr. Pegge, straightening himself and moving off to the cottage. “A jug full, ma'am—with a fine head on it, if you please.”

The good gentleman had only just got into his doorway when Styler saw something which interested him much more than anything he had seen up to that time. Just within the hedgerow, exactly opposite the spot whereon he was kneeling with his eye to a convenient break in the foliage, was a garden roller. On that garden roller Mr. Pegge had carelessly cast his jacket. And from the inside pocket of the jacket projected a well-worn leather pocket-book, evidently full of papers.

“Egad!—what a find! What a—a truly extra chance!” exclaimed Styler in fervent and ecstatic tones—carefully muffled. “Crikey!—this is luck.”

Nothing could have prevented Styler from examining that pocket-book—under the circumstances, neither honour, nor nicety, nor a sense of shame—nothing! He waited until he had seen Mr. Pegge sit down to the white table and set to work on his dinner; then, one eye on him and the other on everything else, he carefully put an arm through the leaves and drew the pocket-book to him. And making sure that its owner ate and drank without thought of what was going on at the end of his peaceful garden, Styler rapidly but surely went through the papers and contents of that book with the celerity of a bank clerk counting out notes. His face assumed all sorts of expressions as he made this examination, and when at last he carefully restored the book to its place, he muttered a word or two.

“Good Lord!—so this is where he’s put himself, is it?” he said. “This is a find! Luck?—not half!”

He remained there for some time, for he wanted to see Mr. Pegge’s frontal presentment. At last Mr. Pegge finished his dinner, came out on the verandah, took a lounge chair, and lighted a cigar. Then Styler saw him: a quiet-looking, grey-bearded old man.

“Good Lord!” mused Styler. “So that’s him as he is nowadays, is it? Well—well!”

He lay hid motionless until Mr. Pegge dropped asleep over his cigar; then he edged his way out of the woodlands and went back to the inn. There he ate bread and cheese, and drank ale, and discussed murders with the landlord, and afterwards hung about the

shady garden until John Smith came down to find him.

Then John Smith and Styler went and walked about in the very middle of an adjacent meadow, and had a long talk, the result of which was that Styler set off to the nearest railway station and took train for London, while his master returned slowly and thoughtfully to Lynne Court.

CHAPTER XII

MEN OF MYSTERY

SMITH and Hextall spent that night as Darrell Tress's guests. And from the time that Smith returned from his short visit to the village until next morning he made no reference to Kesteven's death. Instead he proceeded to cultivate his young host. He proposed a walk round the estate; he kept Darrell's tongue at work on subjects connected with it; at dinner he talked to him about sport and amazed Hextall by his knowledge of racing matters. After dinner he played billiards with him. Darrell Tress went to bed that night in better condition than had been the case for months, and Fowler, coming to Hextall's room to see if he could do anything for him, made a remark to that effect.

"That friend of yours has done our young master all the good in the world, sir," he said. "That's what he wants—a bit of better sort of company instead of that gambling and drinking lot. He's like a new man to-night, and it's a good job, for I reckon he'll want all his wits about him at this inquest to-morrow."

Hextall was looking forward to the inquest with mingled anxiety and curiosity. The curiosity was natural; for the anxiety he could not account. Darrell was anxious, too; it was plain that he had no taste for telling the public anything of his relations with

Kesteven. His own solicitor, who arrived from London early in the morning, gave him the same advice that Smith had already impressed upon him—to tell all he knew and keep nothing back. And to him, as to Smith, he made the same answer—he knew next to nothing.

The village schoolroom, in which the coroner and his twelve good men and true sat to inquire into the circumstances of the death of John Kesteven, was packed to its last inch of holding capacity when the party from Lynne Court went down to it. Not only was it filled, but the schoolyard outside was filled with an excited and speculative crowd. The news of the extraordinary circumstances of the case had been widely spread, and people had come from far and near to glean at first hand any fresh tidings as to the identity of Kesteven, the hue and cry after Tickell, and the strange disappearance of the governess. Darrell Tress shrank from the rude inquisitiveness of the people in the schoolyard, and was obviously nervous about facing the crowded ranks in the school itself. He was glad to slip into the seats which a police constable had kept for him and his friends, and it became plain to his companions that the prospect of giving evidence was distressing him greatly. He looked nervously at the coroner, at the legal gentlemen who represented the authorities, at the stolid faces of the jurymen; he might have been a prisoner in the dock rather than a witness who, after all, had only got to tell what he knew. And Hextall, for one, began to

wonder if Darrell Tress knew something which he did not want to tell.

The preliminary stages of the inquest were neither interesting nor exciting. The coroner, a solicitor from the neighbouring county town, evidently a man of reserved and watchful nature, made no reference to the exceptional circumstances of the inquiry in his remarks and directions to the jurymen. In fact, he appeared to cut down these remarks to their narrowest proportions of set and intended purpose. Within a very brief period the jury had viewed the body (then lying in the village mortuary), the inquiry had begun and the first three witnesses had been interrogated and disposed of. They were the man who found Kesteven lying dead in the spinney, the doctor who was fetched to him, and Mountain, the butler. None of them had much to tell. The gardener told how and where he found the body at ten minutes to six in the morning; the doctor testified that the dead man had been killed by a bullet shot through the brain, certainly fired at close quarters, and that death had taken place instantaneously, and probably about five and a half hours before his examination of the body. And the butler said that he identified the dead man as a person known to him as Mr. John Kesteven, a frequent visitor at Lynne Court, whom he had last seen alive and in good health and in company with Mr. Maurice Tickell, another visitor, at a little before twelve on the night preceding the murder.

There was little in all that—except the mere hearing of it at first hand—to interest the listeners, official

or unofficial. Gossip and common report had already made them familiar with these facts. The evidence of Fowler and of the police-inspector was more productive of thrills. The valet told how he had seen Kesteven and Tickell sitting and smoking and chatting, evidently in the most amicable fashion, late at night; how he and Mountain had been called to the clearing in the spinney early next morning, and how he had found Tickell's room unoccupied and had discovered immediately afterwards that one of his master's bicycles had disappeared. The inspector spoke as to his searching of the dead man's clothing: there was nothing on it, he said, but a handkerchief and a pair of nail scissors. Two or three of the jurymen, good, honest, stolid-faced countrymen, breathed hard and shook their heads when they heard that, and Smith whispered to Hextall that their minds were made up already and would never be changed—murder for the sake of robbery was their notion, sure, certain, ineradicable.

Darrell Tress stood up to give evidence. He was palpably nervous and shaky, and the keen-faced, sharp-eyed legal gentleman who had come down from London, to conduct the case on behalf of the Treasury, looked at him a little curiously, as if wondering why any man should be timorous about so simple a matter. He purposely put two or three formal interrogations to the witness in order to give him confidence. Then, swiftly and surely, he came to the point with a direct question.

"You have seen the body of the man into the circumstances of whose death this inquiry is being held, Mr. Tress, I believe?" he asked.

"I saw it yesterday," answered Darrell.

"Whose body is it?" inquired the legal gentleman sharply.

Darrell stared at his interrogator, then at the coroner, then at the interrogator again.

"Kesteven's," he replied at last. "John Kesteven's, of course!"

"The body of John Kesteven. Who was John Kesteven? You say 'of course,' so, of course, you know?"

"I only know," answered Darrell slowly, "that I knew him as John Kesteven. That's what he called himself."

"Who was he?"

"I—don't know that."

"Where did he live?"

Darrell's face brightened at that question.

"Since I knew him, he lived with me," he replied readily.

"Where did he live before that? Where was he living when you first knew him?"

Darrell shook his head.

"I don't know at all," he answered. "I never heard him say."

"Am I to understand that you took this man who called himself John Kesteven straight into your house or houses without knowing anything about his antecedents?"

"Oh, well, I knew something, of course!"

"What did you know?"

"Well, I knew he was a good sort—a good pal—and so on," said Darrell lamely. "I—you see, I didn't ask him anything. He and I took to each other, you know."

"I see. And so you took him in—an absolute stranger—to be a member of your family?"

"No, I didn't!" growled Darrell suddenly showing signs of restiveness. "I asked him to stop a bit—and he stopped on."

"I see!—Now, Mr. Tress, where and when did you first meet John Kesteven?"

"At a hotel at Reading—last winter."

"How did you meet him? Somebody introduce you?"

"No. It was when I went, alone, to Newbury Steeplechases. I stopped at Reading, and he was at the same hotel. He spoke to me in the billiard-room that night, and next day we went to the races together. We got on very well, you know, and I asked him to my flat in London."

"Did he tell you nothing about himself, who or what he was, where he came from? Think!"

"Oh, well, yes, he did tell me something," replied Darrell suddenly, after a pause. "He said he'd just come from the West Coast of Africa, and he'd been out there for several years."

"Did he tell you in what capacity he'd been there?"

"I think he'd been having a deal in—something. I forget what. I wasn't interested."

"What sort of condition was he in? Good? Bad? Come now, Mr. Tress; was he well dressed? Had he money in his pocket? Had he plenty of belongings with him in the shape of wardrobe and so on? You must remember."

"He hadn't much in the way of clothes." answered Darrell simply, "because he'd only just got back to England."

"You no doubt introduced him to your own tailor?"

"Yes, I did."

"Let me ask you a very direct question—I'm obliged to ask it. Did you pay the bills he incurred in that way?"

"No, I didn't. He paid them himself. They were sent in to me—but Kesteven paid them."

"Then he had money?"

"He'd always plenty of money from the time I knew him."

"Did he get any of that money from you? Now, just let your memory go back. Did he borrow or win any money from you on the very first occasion of your meeting—that night at Reading?"

"Not borrow. He won something—not much—at cards. And a bit at billiards—a trifle. We were playing billiards all the evening, and we played cards in my room for an hour or two later on."

"You say—not much. Now, how much?"

"Oh—I don't know! Perhaps a couple of hundred. And he won a lot of money next day at the races."

"So he was a card-player and a backer of horses? I suppose you and he played cards a great deal, later on?"

"Yes."

"Did you lose a great deal to him?"

"Not exactly to him. Simetimes I won from him."

"I put it to you that from the time you first knew him until now you lost a lot of money to this man?"

"No, I didn't! We played cards a good deal—with other men—but I never lost a lot of money. I'm extraordinarily lucky at cards. Of course I lost sometimes."

The questioner paused, looked at his notes, and went off on another track.

"This man whom you knew as Kesteven lived with you from the time you made his acquaintance until the time of his death—either at your flat in London, or at your house here at Lynne Court?"

"Yes."

"Did he never tell you more of his antecedents, his history, his family?"

"No—I never asked him anything? It wasn't my affair—I wasn't interested in that."

"You and he got on very well together?"

"We got on all right," replied Darrell. He was not nervous any longer, but he was getting restive and sullen under the questioning, and he began to look at his questioner with glances that boded no good.

"Very well. Now we come to recent events. Some days ago you and this man went to Boulogne together, and there you gambled and had good luck?"

“Extraordinary luck!”

“You came back to Folkstone the afternoon before Kesteven’s death, and motored home, I think, stopping at Brighton to dine, and I believe Kesteven carried all your winnings on him?”

“Yes. Five or six thousand pounds—in French and English notes,” replied Darrell impatiently. “And he had them on him when I left him and Tickell that night. I could tell you all I know in two minutes if you’d let me tell you in my own way!” he suddenly burst out. “I don’t understand this questioning.”

“A little patience, Mr. Tress,” said the questioner soothingly. “I understand that you met Mr. Tickell at Brighton and brought him on with you. That is so? Now, who is Mr. Tickell?”

“I don’t know!”

“What do you know of Mr. Tickell? Tell it in your own way.”

“All I know of Tickell is that he’s a chap who used to come with Kesteven to my flat to play cards now and then, and that I’ve seen him once or twice at race-courses,” answered Darrell. “I know nothing more about him in any way.”

“You don’t know who he is, what he is, where he lives——”

A sudden commotion at the door of the schoolroom caused the legal gentleman to pause. A constable came through the crowd, holding a buff envelope above the heads of the people. He handed it across the table to the legal gentleman, who tore it open, read the contents, and turned to the coroner.

"I think I had better give you this news at once, sir," he said blandly. "The man we were speaking of has been found."

CHAPTER XIII

THE ANNOTATED CHART

AMIDST the buzz of excited exclamation which ran round the crowded room the telegram was passed from hand to hand amongst those sitting at the table, and presently Smith and Hextall bent over it together.

"From the police-inspector at Lynchfield," muttered Smith. "Lynchfield?—ah, that's on the Hampshire border, on the way to Southhampton. 'Man answering description of Tickell is lying unconscious from bicycle accident at cottage near here. Send some one to identify.' Ah!—you see, Hextall, he's been making his way to Southhampton to get out of the country. Now what are these fellows about?"

The legal gentleman from London, the coroner, the foreman of the jury, and a police-superintendent were whispering together at the end of the table. Presently the coroner looked up.

"Under the circumstances," he said, "I think we had better adjourn until this day week. It is very probable, gentlemen, that much more important evidence will be placed before you."

The excited audience made its way out of the room to swell the throng gathered in the schoolyard, and the officials and witnesses left behind formed groups and began to talk. And Darrell Tress came up to

Smith and Hextall, looking more nervous and alarmed than ever.

"I say—I say!" he exclaimed. "Do—do, you really think that is Tickell—do you?"

The police-superintendent, bustling forward, overheard Darrell's words.

"We want you to go along with us, Mr. Tress," he said. "I suppose plenty of your servants could identify him, but it will be far better if you go yourself. I've my car outside, and I and the inspector are going at once. How soon can you be ready?"

Darrell looked at his two companions. It was plain enough that he had no taste for this expedition, and once more Hextall felt himself vaguely puzzled and concerned by his attitude and behaviour. But Smith took Darrell by the arm and led him to the door.

"Your car's outside, too, Tress," he said. "Come along—Hextall and I are going with you. How long," he added, turning to the superintendent, "how long will it take us to get to Lynchfield?"

"Lynchfield? Oh—a little over an hour." answered the superintendent, "It's about twenty miles across country."

The two cars, the police officials in one, Darrell and his two companions in the other, sped off through the excited crowd which had gathered in the village street. Darrell shrank away from the prying eyes and leaned back in the car, wiping his forehead.

"I wish to God I'd never seen Kesteven, nor Tickell, nor any of the infernal crew!" he growled as they got clear of the village and took the road which led across

the hills towards the Hampshire border. "And I wish Tickell had got clear away, so I do, by gad! I do, indeed, so that I couldn't be bothered with all this infernal business. And, by gad! as soon as you'll let her go, Hextall, I'll take Paquita and the youngster, and we'll go abroad somewhere—Egypt, or India, or somewhere—and keep out of the way until it's all over."

"Bad time of the year, Tress, for either Egypt or India," remarked Smith coolly. "And I'm afraid you'll be wanted during Tickell's trial. You'll be about the most important witness they'll have you know."

Darrell showed renewed signs of temper and impatience, and Hextall, who saw that his nerves were seriously upset, hastened to soothe him.

"You don't know that there'll be any trial, Smith," he said with a meaning glare at the barrister. "You've got to commit a man for trial, I believe, and Tickell hasn't even been before a bench of magistrates yet. Besides that, if Tickell's had a bad accident, he mayn't recover. We might find him dead."

Darrell started in his seat, and snapped out an exclamation which Hextall knew to be genuine enough.

"By gad! I wish he may be dead!" he said. "It would be the best news I've heard since—since yesterday. There'd be an end of all this, then. Do you think it's likely?" he went on, turning eagerly to Hextall. "Do you, really?"

"I don't know whether it's likely or unlikely," answered Hextall, again conscious of a vague uneasiness

raised by Darrell's strange manner. "But the probability is that he met with the accident referred to in the telegram at some time yesterday morning, and if he's been unconscious for twenty-four hours he's badly hurt."

The two cars went on, up hill, down dale, across the hills, until just as noon struck, they pulled up before a police-station in the wide street of a pleasant little market town, which stood in the midst of a lovely, much-wooded country. A couple of officials came out and exchanged greetings with the police from Lynne, and Darrell and his companions left their car and went over to them. The Lynchfield superintendent had already begun his story when his confrère from Lynne interrupted him.

"Stop a bit," he said. "This is Mr. Tress, of Lynne Court, and these gentlemen are his friends. Tell him what you were going to say; they're all concerned."

"There's not such a lot to tell," remarked the local superintendent. "Of course we heard from your people first thing yesterday morning, giving a description of this man, and we kept a smart look-out in our district all yesterday, because, you see, we're between you and Portsmouth and Southampton, and we thought he might be making for the coast. However, we never heard nor saw anything until about half-past-seven this morning. Then a labouring man came in here and told a tale. He's a man who lives in a by-lane that runs between this road and another high road, two or three miles out of the town, going west; his is the only cottage thereabouts. He said that yesterday

morning, about seven o'clock, after he'd gone to his work, his wife went up their lane to fetch water from a spring. I know the place he was talking about; there's a sharp fall and a sudden twist in that lane, and near the spring there's a disused quarry. The woman heard groans coming from the quarry, and she went there and found the man I wired to you about—Tickell, dead certain! He'd evidently been thrown from his bicycle, clean through the railings of this quarry, and he was badly hurt—sort of half-conscious when the woman found him. She fetched some water and brought him round, and after a time she managed to get him to her cottage. Then he became unconscious, or fainted again, and he was like that, coming to and then going off again, all day. They're oldish people who live at this cottage; there's no one near them, and the woman didn't know what to do. She wanted to go for a doctor during the day, but the man wouldn't let her; he kept assuring her that he would come round and be all right. He seemed better when her husband reached home at night, and he said again that he would be all right if they would let him rest there until this morning. But when the morning came round they found him unconscious, and evidently worse than ever, so the man came in here for a doctor, and the doctor advised him to call and tell us. Of course, we immediately thought of Tickell, and we went off to the cottage at once. And there's no doubt the man is Tickell. He's a lot of that money on him."

Darrell Tress started and became very pale. And Smith broke in with a question which transferred interest to himself.

"How did you know that Tickell had what you call that money on him?" he asked.

The Lynne inspector answered:

"I've circulated a report that Tickell might be in possession of a large sum of money in French and English bank-notes," he said.

"And he has 'em!" continued the local superintendent. "At least, he's a lot of it. Between three and four thousand pounds, I should say, in Bank of England notes—there are no French ones, though. We searched him. And that's about all that there is on him, no papers much beyond a queer sort of map or chart which we couldn't make out. But we'd better go on there—I left two of my men at the cottage, and there's a doctor there, too."

"What did the doctor say?" asked Hextall.

"He said he was very bad, sir—internal injuries as well as a damaged skull," answered the superintendent. "They're doubtful if they'll be able to move him to the hospital."

They all got into their cars again, the Lynchfield police with their confrères from Lynne, and proceeding through the little town, a couple of miles further along the high-road, they came to a narrow lane which turned sharply away from the main road and suddenly twisted off amongst overhanging trees. There the police got out of their car, and the whole party went down the lane on foot.

"It's a perfect marvel to us that this man should ever have tried to ride down this lane," remarked the Lynchfield superintendent. "You can see for yourselves, gentlemen, what it's like—madness to ride down it. The only thing we can think of that induced him to do it is that from the road we've just left you can see that other road there in the valley, and that this lane makes a short cut to it. Then, of course, you can't see that it's so steep until you come to this corner. Anyway, there's the place where he was thrown into the quarry—you see, he crashed through those rails—and yonder's the cottage where he's lying. Of course, we may find him dead—it's possible."

Hextall, who was chiefly occupying himself by watching Darrell Tress, caught a gleam of hope in his eyes—it was abundantly plain that nothing would give him such relief as to know that Tickell was silenced for good. He was pondering over this strange conduct when they reached the cottage door and encountered the doctor and the constable who were coming out to meet them. The doctor shook his head as he met the inquiring gaze of the Lynchfield superintendent.

"Still unconscious," he said. "I don't know whether we shan't have to arrange an operation—I must have further help and advice."

"This gentleman is a doctor," said the inspector from Lynne. "Dr. Hextall—a London doctor, I believe, sir?"

The two medical men went outside and talked, and the police-superintendent turned to Darrell.

"Just come inside, Mr. Tress, and see if this man is Tickell," he said. "It won't take you a minute, and it can't do him any harm if he's unconscious."

Darrell entered the cottage with every sign of distaste, Smith following closely at his elbow. The injured man lay in the house-place on an improvised bed, at the side of which sat a constable. Darrell gave one quick glance at the white face and turned away.

"That's Tickell, of course," he said. "Is that enough?"

He tuned sharply and was walking out of the cottage when the superintendent called him into another room, a little parlour on the opposite side of the small entrance porch. He produced a Norfolk jacket, and from an inside pocket took a note-case held together by a stout elastic band.

"Here's all that we found on him," he observed, looking at Smith, whom he evidently conceived to be a person of some responsibility. "There was nothing more beyond a watch and chain, a ring or two, and some small things. Now, look here, Mr. Tress—are those bank-notes part of the lot we've heard about? They are? Good! They total up to about what I said—getting on to four thousand pounds. Pretty good proof that of who killed Kesteven, that! Now here's the only scrap of paper we found on him—and what it is I'm shot if I can make out. Looks like a bit of a map or a chart, or something of that sort. What do you make of it, sir?" he went on, handing a much-

crumpled and folded half-sheet of note-paper to Smith. "I hear you're an expert in these matters."

Smith took the paper into his hand and looked carefully at it. Upon it was roughly drawn, in almost obliterated pencil lines, a diagram which was something like a leg of mutton in shape; across this various lines were traced; at certain points along these lines figures were inserted. Beneath the diagram were what Smith took to be explanatory notes. These were puzzling enough. Against the figure 1 appeared the letter W; against 2 the letters P P; against 3 more letters, K or D; against 4 one letter—C. Beneath all this were two lines of writing: one, "*Any evening 12th—18th, 8½—9½*"; the other, "P—Endeavour; C—Accomplishment."

"If you've no objection," said Smith, "I'll make a copy of that document. Then I can perhaps get at its meaning in my leisure time. It has a meaning, of course."

"Much obliged to you, sir," said the superintendent. "Glad of any assistance. I don't suppose that he"—here he nodded at the other room—"would tell us if he were able. Well, Mr. Tress," he went on, turning to Darrell, who stood sullenly watching Smith, "that's the man, you see, and you can look on him as being a sure starter for the gallows, sir! Another month——"

Darrell smothered a curse and went angrily out of the cottage into the fresh air.

CHAPTER XIV

COLD FEAR

HEXTALL and the Lynchfield doctor presently entered the room in which Smith was making a rough copy of the mysterious chart.

"We're going to have him moved to our hospital in the town," said the Lynchfield doctor. "He'll have to be operated on. So you," he continued, turning to the police officials, "must make arrangements at once, and in the meantime I'll stay here with him. That's an odd thing," he remarked to Smith, indicating the chart. "I was looking it over this morning. Can you make it out?"

"Not yet," answered Smith. He put the copy which he had made into his pocket, and taking Hextall outside the cottage pointed to Darrell, who was walking moodily about the lane. "Look here, Hextall," he said. "What's the matter with Tress? It's very evident to me that he'd cheerfully have given half his fortune if we'd found this chap dead, or if you medicos could assure him that he's going to die. Why? When we came down from London yesterday morning he was certain that Tickell had killed Kesteven, you remember, and he was all agog to see him swing for it. Now he's the other way about. Again I ask—why?"

"Nerves," answered Hextall. "His nervous system has never been strong, and his recent life hasn't improved it. He can't stand this publicity, and being asked questions, and all the rest of it. That's all."

Smith shook his head.

"No!" he said. "That's not it. That youngster has heard something—since yesterday. Something's on his mind. Look at him!"

Darrell, evidently careless or unconscious about observation, had come to a stand in the lane. He was muttering to himself; his pale face was working almost convulsively, and he suddenly threw up both his hands with a gesture that seemed to signify despair.

"I say—look at him!" repeated Smith. "Don't tell me that's mere nerves! I tell you that chap has heard something since yesterday we don't know of. And he's working himself up into a state of cold, killing fear. Pure fear!"

"In that case, it'll do him no good hanging about here," said Hextall. "We've done all that's wanted, and we may as well go back at once."

Darrell hailed this proposal to set off to Lynne Court with obvious relief. He gave his chauffeur curt orders to put on speed. He was moody and taciturn all the way back, and when he reached the house he excused himself on the plea of a splitting headache and left Hextall and Smith to lunch alone. In the presence of the servants these two said nothing to each other of the events of the morning, but when lunch was over they went off to a quiet corner of the grounds, each mutually conscious that there were mat-

ters to discuss. And Smith, taking his copy of this strange chart from his pocket, laid it on his knee and directed his companion's attention to it.

"Now what do you make of that, Hextall?" he said. "Supposing you'd picked that scrap of paper up—anywhere—how would it strike you? What is it? Is this leg-of-mutton shaped diagram a map of some district? are these initials those of places? Are these cabalistic figures directions and instructions? Probably they are—but it's going to be a stiff job to find out their meaning. And yet—I will lay all I'm worth to this half-smoked cigar that in that rough diagram, of which this is a copy, lies the whole secret of Kesteven's murder!"

Hextall took the copy into his own hand and studied it.

"It looks like an elementary sort of route map," he said after a pause. "And all these things are probably directions to a certain place. But—where's the district that's mapped, and what do these other details mean? I see only one thing there that gives me any notion."

"I confess that I see nothing that gives me any notion," muttered Smith. "What do you see?"

"Why, this," replied Hextall. "You see that line—*'Any evening 12th—18th—8½—9½.'* Do you make nothing of that?"

"No!" exclaimed Smith. "Nothing!"

"Well," said Hextall, "perhaps I don't, really. But it strikes me as being a bit significant that to-day is

the thirteenth day of May, and that yesterday was—naturally—the twelfth. Eh?”

Smith stared, whistled, and snatched at the paper.

“By George—good!” he said. “Good! I’m beginning to see. You think——”

“I should say,” continued Hextall, “that this was a memorandum of instructions, probably to Tickell, to go somewhere and meet somebody, on some—any—evening between the twelfth and the eighteenth, between the hours of half-past eight and half-past nine. And I also think that Tickell was on his way to discharge that commission when he had that accident.”

“That’s good reasoning,” said Smith. He put the paper away carefully in his pocket-book. “I’ll have that diagram and the rest of it worked out before many hours are over,” he went on. “I’m going off to town by the five train. What about you?”

“I’ve arranged to stay here until to-morrow,” answered Hextall. “I want to see Miss Tress fairly convalescent—and I also want to have a talk to Tress. I’m going to have a solid try to pull him round.”

“You’ll have to build up his nerves first,” remarked Smith. “He was a good deal knocked by one thing and another this morning. I wish I knew what was in his mind. This is a lot bigger mystery, Hextall, than any of us fancied at first. I’m more than ever convinced that Tickell is as innocent of that murder as I am.”

“Who’s guilty, then?” asked Hextall.

“Some person who’ll very likely go scot-free,” replied Smith. “However, there are one or two things

to go upon. Master Styler, during his short stay here yesterday, hit accidentally on an interesting little matter which may have some bearing on the case, and he went promptly back to town to make some further investigation about it. I'll tell you what it was afterwards—not yet. And also Styler, before news of the murder came, had got just a slight clue as regards Kesteven, very slight indeed, but something, and he'll be busy with that. So I want to get back to hear his report."

"What did he find out about Kesteven—isn't that yet ripe for telling?" asked Hextall. "I'm not without curiosity, you know."

"Oh, well!" answered Smith, "I can tell you that. It's a very small thing—but it may develop into a big one—we may get at Kesteven's identity through it. When Styler had that interview with Fowler at your house, he got Fowler to take him back to the flat in Queen Anne Street, in order to look over any effects that Kesteven had there. He wanted to see if there was anything in the shape of papers that would show where Kesteven hailed from, before he introduced himself to Tress. On the surface, there was nothing in his drawers, or trunks, or clothes; not even a letter! But Styler's a persevering sort of chap, not easily baffled, and he's a perfect genius for finding things in unlikely places. He got hold of the one suit that Kesteven possessed when he first came into the Tress *ménage*, and in the coat he found a secret pocket, in the lining, wherein, wrapped in oiled silk, was—a marriage certificate."

"A marriage certificate!" exclaimed Hextall. "Kesteven's?"

"Not in his name," replied Smith. "But I should say that it was his, from the fact that he was taking so much care of it. It was a certificate of a marriage contracted some years ago at an obscure church in the City. Styler took a copy of it at the time he found it—but he'll have the original in his possession by now—he got a key of the flat from Fowler yesterday before leaving for London. So we may work up something from that—I've got a bit of a start of a theory of my own about that matter."

"What?" asked Hextall.

It may be that the governess, Miss Brock, who's disappeared so strangely, is Kesteven's wife," replied Smith. "He brought her here, you know. Well, I'm off to the station. Walk there with me."

As the two friends reached the station—a mere railway halt at the further end of the village—Mrs. Renton drove up in a smart pony-carriage, accompanied by an elderly, military-looking man, who presently went off in the same train which carried Smith away. Mrs. Renton came to Hextall.

"Can I drive you back to the Court?" she asked. "I pass the gates, you know."

Hextall thanked her and took the seat which the military man had just vacated. And Mrs. Renton whipped up her pony and immediately began to chatter.

"You mustn't think I'm a mere gossip, Dr. Hextall," she said, "but like all village folk, I'm curious

about things that happen on one's own doorstep. Is it true that the man Tickell has been found, and that you've been to see him?"

Hextall reflected before he answered. After all, everything that he knew as to what had taken place at the lonely cottage would be public property by next morning, it was only forestalling the newspapers to tell Mrs. Renton the plain facts. And so he briefly told her what had happened.

"I suppose it would be a mercy if the poor man died," she said. "It would save such a lot of unpleasantness, wouldn't it? I'm so awfully sorry for the Tress's; it's dreadful having to be dragged into law courts and inquests, and that sort of thing. I'm sure Darrell Tress dreads it."

That Darrell Tress dreaded something became increasingly evident to Hextall during the remainder of that day. He was restless to the last degree; he could not keep to one seat nor even to one room; it was a trial to dine with him; it was useless to attempt to engage him at billiards. And at last Hextall took him aside and spoke plainly.

"Look here!" he said. "I'm not going to mince matters. Have you had anything to drink to-day?"

"No!" growled Darrell. "Nor yesterday either—since lunch. You saw what I had then. I'm going to chuck all that. I've had nothing—honour bright!"

"Just so," replied Hextall, "and the result is that your nerves are ragged and raw, and you're utterly unstrung, and you'll get no sleep to-night, and be a worse wreck to-morrow morning! You must break off

your previous habits by degrees—violent measures won't do. Now you're going to sit down in that chair and you'll smoke a quiet cigar and have a reasonable amount of whiskey, and I shall give you a sleeping-draught, and, in due course, see you to bed. Put yourself in my hands, Tress, and I'll bring you round in several ways."

Darrell became childishly obedient, and when Hextall finally left him at his bedroom door he seemed to have recovered his spirits. But his face clouded as he shook hands.

"I'm afraid I've been on the queer side to-day," he said. "But, by gad! I've had something to bother me, I can assure you. It's—but perhaps I'll tell you about it to-morrow—I believe I'm sleepy now."

"That's right—sleep!" said Hextall.

He went off to his own room, wondering what Darrell had to tell. But being very tired, he soon fell asleep. Just as suddenly as he had fallen asleep, he woke with a start. Through the open window of his bedroom came the sound of the opening of another window; then a soft pattering of feet along the balcony upon which these windows looked out. All the upper windows in that wing of the house, which faced the lawns and the spinney beyond, were French windows; the balcony upon which they opened ran along the face of the wing, and at one end was terminated by a flight of old stone stairs which led down to the gardens. The muffled steps which Hextall heard went in the direction of those stairs and suddenly died away.

Filled with a strange, dreadful fear, Hextall sprang out of bed, huddled on some clothing, and let himself out of his own window. He knew that the window of Paquita's bedroom was only two removes from his own and he hurried to it. And then he saw, in the light of a cloud-obscured moon, that it was open, and he turned quickly to the balustrade of the balcony to see a white shape disappear amongst the trees at the edge of the spinney.

He knew what was happening then, and as he clutched the cold stones he shivered with the fear of what his knowledge meant. Paquita was walking in her sleep! And she had gone to the scene of Kesteven's murder! It seemed a long time before the white shape reappeared among the trees. She was coming back . . . she was making straight for the stairs and the balcony and her room. She came swiftly on, and Hextall shrank into a shadow and watched—watched until the girl, her eyes fixed on vacancy, yet full and lustrous, glided by him as if she were a ghost and passed into her window. And as he himself moved he felt his arms gripped in a tight, frenzied hold, and a hot breath on his cheek, and Darrell's voice, as frenzied as his grip, was hissing in his ear:

"You didn't see her, I tell you!—I tell you, you didn't see her! You were dreaming, you infernal fool! You were——"

Then the voice died out, and the fierce grip was loosed, and Hextall twisted sharply round as his host sank at his feet with a queer, gurgling groan.

CHAPTER XV

THE WAKEFUL FOOTMAN

THE choking sound which escaped from Darrell Tress's lips as he sank unconscious on the balcony suddenly died away, and a dead silence fell around Hextall and these strange happenings. He himself held his breath and stood listening, every nerve quickening with fear and anticipation. He was afraid of what he might hear through the open window of Paquita's room. But presently he heard the slight, almost imperceptible creaking of a bed, and he knew that Paquita had gone back to her normal slumbers and was safe for that time, and with a deep sigh of relief he stooped, picked Darrell up, and half carried, half dragged him to his room and laid him gently down on a couch near the window. Then he ran to his own room, took some restoratives from his bag, and hastened back quietly and stealthily; he had no wish to rouse any one, not even Fowler or either of the nurses, for he was afraid of what Darrell might say when he came round.

Darrell, brought round, suddenly sat up with a muttered exclamation, and stared wildly at Hextall. And Hextall, seeing that he was conscious again, hastened to close the windows. Whatever Darrell had to say must not penetrate outside that room.

"You!" exclaimed Darrell. "I—I thought you were Walters. I—what's happened?"

Hextall, instead of replying, gave him a dose of brandy. And Darrell's memory came back, and he groaned dismally.

"I remember—I remember!" he almost wailed. "I—oh, God, Hextall, was it you, then! And—you saw her?"

"Pull yourself together," said Hextall. "Come—don't be frightened. There!—you're better now. Steady, man! and when you're calmer, tell me whatever you like."

Darrell, who was wagging his head to and fro and muttering to himself, shivered, and Hextall threw a wrap over him. But Darrell pushed it aside with a weak laugh.

"It's not—that," he murmured. "I'm shaking from fear. Oh, my God, Hextall, you don't know what I've gone through since—since—was it yesterday? I don't know. And—then—to see it with my own eyes!"

"To see what?" asked Hextall. "Take your time, now."

"Walters told me," said Darrell. "Walters—you know. One of the footmen. I suppose I was half asleep or something when I rushed out just now and saw—her—and collared you. I thought you were Walters, and I wanted to make you—Walters, I mean—believe that you—he—didn't see—Paquita. But—oh, my God!—I saw her!"

Hextall sat down at his side and made him drink the rest of the brandy.

"Now what did Walters tell you?" he asked. He knew that Darrell's mind was warped and confused, and that it would never be cleared until he had told what was troubling it; there was, moreover, the question of Paquita's safety to be considered. "Tell me quickly what Walters said to you," he repeated. "Don't be afraid—you're all right, Tress."

"I remember now," said Darrell with a sudden effort. "It was early yesterday morning—before we went to that beastly inquest. Walters came to me in my room, and said he'd got something which he thought he ought to tell me. He said that he's lately been sleeping very badly, and that nothing he'd taken had done him any good, as he'd been in the habit of walking about the grounds and the park last thing at night for an hour. And he said that the other night—the night Kesteven was shot—he'd been out that way, and he was coming across the Dutch garden at the end of the house there—end of this wing, you know, and he saw—he saw Paquita! Good God, man!—he saw Paquita, my poor little sister! Oh!"

"Steady!" commanded Hextall, laying his hand on Darrell's wrist. "Steady now, Tress! Keep a hold on yourself. What then? I've seen your sister walking in her sleep to-night—so have you. It's a not uncommon thing—with some people. She's had much to distress and try her, and her nervous system——"

Darrell shook his head miserably.

"Yes, yes; but it was just about the time that Kesteven was shot, according to what the doctor said," he answered. "The doctor said between twelve and one, and Walters said this was at twenty to one."

"But even then," said Hextall, "that was a mere coincidence. Good heavens, man, surely you don't think——"

Darrell lifted his hands with a gesture of despairing helplessness.

"Oh!" he cried. "Walters—Walters said she—she had a revolver in her hand! He saw it!"

He suddenly let his hands fall; a second later he dropped his face into them and began to sob. And Hextall rose slowly to his feet, and stood, staring into vacancy, silent.

Was it possible? That question rang and rang and rang through his bewildered brain until he could think of nothing else—not even of the utterly broken-down lad sitting beside him. He remembered what Paquita had said on the occasion of that midnight visit in Wimpole Street—that she had often been tempted to kill Kesteven; he remembered, too, the almost desperate fashion in which she spoke of what she might have done. "*I could have shot him more than once, and nobody would ever have known.*" And gradually his mind began to work on the possibilities of the matter. He knew that persons given to somnambulism often do in sleep what they have contemplated in waking hours; it might be that Paquita,

brooding over the matter which so troubled her, had . . .

But Hextall suddenly checked himself with an impatient exclamation. Pshaw!—how was it possible that this thing could have happened? It would have meant that a living, watchful man, known to be keenly alert to most things, was shot by a young woman who was sleep-walking! Impossible—impossible—impossible!—it could not be! And yet, as he repeated and repeated that word impossible, something within him answered “Yes—impossible—and yet . . . possible!”

He turned on Darrell and shook him by the shoulder, almost roughly.

“Come!” he said. “That’s natural, Tress, but we’ve got to think. Tell me—will this man hold his tongue?”

“I paid him to hold it,” answered Darrell.

“At his request?” exclaimed Hextall. “Black-mail?”

“No—not that. He didn’t ask for anything. He may have expected it. Anyway, I gave him something handsome and told him to say nothing.”

“Pity! He’ll expect more. But anyway, you think he’s not said a word to any one yet?”

“I’m sure he won’t have done that. He’s a decent fellow—very.”

“You must let me see him in the morning, Tress. In the meantime, try to sleep and to think no more about this. Let me try to explain to you,” continued

Hextall, "how almost utterly impossible it is for what you seem to fear to have happened. You see——"

He sat down and talked earnestly for a while, arguing as much to convince himself as to reassure Darrell Tress. And at last he went away, leaving Darrell more composed, and going straight to Nurse Palliser's room he knocked gently at the door.

Nurse Palliser almost immediately came out into the corridor to him. In the light of the candle which she carried Hextall looked at her more closely than he had ever done before. She was a tall, well-made woman, evidently possessed of great physical strength. Apparently now approaching early middle age, she still showed traces of considerable beauty. But Hextall was not looking at her for these characteristics; he was wondering if she was really the capable and watchful nurse that John Smith had made her out to be.

"Who is on duty to-night in Miss Tress's dressing room?" he asked. "One of you two nurses always sleeps there, of course?"

Nurse Palliser showed some surprise.

"Of course!" she replied. "One or other of us has always been there since we came. Nurse Hicks to-night."

"Then Nurse Hicks is rather too sound a sleeper," remarked Hextall. "Miss Tress has been walking in her sleep."

Nurse Palliser showed more surprise and some alarm. She immediately turned in the direction of Paquita's door, but Hextall stopped her.

"Wait!" he said. "Miss Tress has gone back to bed, I am sure, but you can go in and see for yourself in a minute. I wanted to ask you—who was on duty the night you came down here—the first night?"

"Nurse Hicks, doctor," she answered. "We are taking it in turns."

"For the whole night at a stretch?"

"Yes. Nurse Hicks said that Miss Tress slept quite through the night that first night, and she certainly did last night, when I was on duty, because I was awake a great deal—I am a poor sleeper."

"Very well," said Hextall. "Go in through the dressing-room and see for yourself that Miss Tress is all right. If they are both asleep, don't disturb them. And you needn't say anything to Nurse Hicks—I'll speak to her myself."

Then he went to his own room, not to sleep, but to think. If ever there had been a time in his life, he said to himself as he stood at his window, looking out on the moonbeams that flecked the lawns below, a time in which it was necessary to think hard and clearly, it was this. It was no use indulging in vague speculations. What the footman, Walters, had told Darrell Tress was as good as a direct charge against Paquita—that she had shot Kesteven. His testimony, reduced to a plain statement of fact, was that he had seen Miss Tress coming from the direction of the spinney at twenty minutes to one o'clock on the night of the murder, and that she was carrying a revolver in her hand.

Plain fact that—put in a plain way. And Walters had not said—at any rate, Darrell had not reported that he had said—that his young mistress was walking in her sleep. He had simply reported that he had seen her, at a certain hour, at a certain place, carrying a revolver. He might not have recognized that she was walking in her sleep. He would not be close to her. The light would be uncertain. The probability was that no notion of somnambulism had entered the footman's mind. And the probabilities were that the man would speedily find himself in the position of having to say, "Here is a man, Tickell, in imminent danger of being hanged for the murder of Kesteven, and yet I am able to prove that Kesteven was very likely shot by my mistress. Supposing that contingency arose . . ."

Hextall tried to recall all that he knew of somnambulism. It was not much. He knew that there were various types of it. There was a state in which the senses were not quite suspended—a sort of half-sleep. There was the commonly-known type of sleep-walking in which a person leaves his bed during sleep and walks about, usually in an apparently objectless fashion, but sometimes with a direct purpose arising from a mental process continued during sleep. But there was a third—the sleep produced by hypnotic influence. In that, he knew, the subject appears to be in full possession of his senses, to be, in fact, wide awake, while he is really under the absolute control of the hypnotist. He knew, too, that from such a sleep the subject cannot be aroused by any ordinary

means; only the hypnotist who has induced the state can release from it. That knowledge caused Hextall to invent an excuse for seeing Paquita as early as possible that morning. And he found her well and normal, and convinced himself that she was quite unconscious of her nocturnal adventure. The hypnotic theory in this case accordingly went by the board. There had been no hypnotism, he assured himself; it was a case of ordinary sleep-walking.

Later in the day Hextall contrived to get Paquita and both her nurses away from the house, sending them together for a drive. Then he found Darrell and took him up to Paquita's rooms.

"Now," he said. "There's a thing we must do at once, Tress. We've got to investigate that revolver matter. Walters says your sister was carrying a revolver. Therefore—the revolver must be in her rooms. You must find it."

"That won't be difficult," responded Darrell. "Paquita and I have always been accustomed to having a revolver or two handy ever since we were children—we lived in a wild spot before we came to England. It's probably in some drawer of her dressing-table."

He found a revolver within a few minutes. It lay in a small cabinet near Paquita's bed. It was a six-chambered revolver, and from one chamber Darrell presently drew a spent cartridge.

CHAPTER XVI

DEDUCTION BY METHOD

THE two men looked at each other silently as Darrell laid revolver and cartridge on an adjacent table, and it seemed a long time to both before Hextall spoke.

"That," he said in a low voice, "that may be the cartridge which your sister fired off accidentally at your flat."

But Darrell shook his head miserably.

"No!" he muttered. "Because it isn't the same revolver. I collared the one she had there—or Kesteven did. Anyway, I got it, and it's locked up in my bedroom at the flat."

Hextall picked up the revolver and examined it.

"I don't know anything about these things," he answered. "I suppose you do? Can you tell if this has been fired recently?"

Darrell took the spent cartridge and glanced at the casing, almost indifferently.

"I should say so," he answered. He took the revolver from Hextall, drew out the remaining cartridges and dropped them into his pocket. "I'll have a hunt round and find out if Paquita's got any more," he continued. "If she's given to walking in her sleep and carrying this sort of thing, it won't do. But—what's to be done, Hextall?"

"About what?" asked Hextall, who was trying to think matters out.

Darrell gave him a look which conveyed and suggested a good many things.

"That chap, Walters," he answered. "By gad!—he's got the whip hand of us! Supposing——"

"Don't suppose anything," interrupted Hextall. "Wait! I'll see Walters. Let's see him at once."

But even as he spoke he reflected on the real uselessness of anything that he could say to the footman. If the man told what he knew, certain complications would surely arise, the end of which nobody could foresee. He pictured the police getting hold of this news! it would be such a chance for a persevering detective as was not often obtainable. Something of his feeling must have showed itself in his face, for Darrell, glancing at him, groaned.

"It's all very well, Hextall," he said, "but we're at his mercy. If we let him see that——"

"We mustn't let him see anything," broke in Hextall. "What I want is to see him—to size him up."

Walters, summoned to Darrell's study, presented a countenance of stolid respect and attention to his master and Dr. Hextall. He replied quietly and politely to all the doctor's questions. It was quite true that he had seen Miss Tress on the night of Mr. Kesteven's death, and under the circumstances described. He had not been very near her, but he had noticed that she was carrying a revolver. He had not spoken a word to any one on this matter—except to Mr. Tress.

He listened with interest while Hextall spoke to him. Miss Tress, said Hextall, had lately been much mentally disturbed, and she had evidently formed a habit of walking in her sleep. Presumably, something in her mental processes had made her pick up and carry the revolver on that particular night. And—it would be as well, for the present at any rate, if Walters would abstain from mentioning the matter to any one.

Walters nodded understandingly.

"I shan't say a word, sir," he said. "I've never had any intention of saying a word. I thought it my duty to tell Mr. Tress, but I never dreamt of telling any one else. You can rely on me, sir."

"That's right," responded Hextall. "I'm glad to hear it. Now, there's a question that I wanted to ask you, Walters, apart from this. You say, I understand, that you were walking about the park and grounds for some time about midnight on the night of Mr. Kesteven's death?"

"Quite an hour, sir," replied Walters. "From about eleven forty-five to ten minutes to one."

"Was it a very still night?" asked Hextall.

"The nights are always still about here, sir. You don't hear anything except perhaps a dog barking at some of the farms, or a train going along in the distance."

"Just so. Well, now, during the hour that you were out there, did you hear a shot fired?"

"No, sir—most certainly not! I thought of that myself, sir, when I noticed the revolver in my mis-

tress's hand—at least, I thought of it when I heard about Mr. Kesteven, next morning.”

“If a shot had been fired anywhere in the park or grounds, or garden, at that time—while you were out, you know—you’d have heard it?”

“Couldn’t have failed to hear it, sir. The sound of even a small pistol would have carried a long way on a still night. And that made me dead certain, sir, that Miss Tress hadn’t fired her revolver while she was out. I was never far away from the house, and I couldn’t possibly have helped hearing any shot—yes, any sort of a shot, fired within a mile.”

“I’m glad you thought of that,” observed Hextall. He turned to Darrell when the footman had gone, with a reiterated promise to keep close counsel, and he smiled encouragingly. “That’s the best bit of news we’ve had, Tress,” he said. “I must tell that to Smith at once. Do you not see what it means—that fact that Walters never heard a shot?”

“Not exactly,” answered Darrell.

“It means what has already crossed the minds of more than one of us,” said Hextall. “It means that there’s good reason to believe that Kesteven was not shot where he was found, but in some house in the neighbourhood, and that his body was brought to that clearing in the spinney at a later hour in the morning. I must certainly let Smith know of this as soon as I get to town this afternoon.”

“You’re going to leave us?” exclaimed Darrell ruefully.

"I must—I only arranged for two days' leave. But I have a suggestion to make to you. I should like to have your sister under my care a little longer—moreover, I don't think it's exactly a good thing for her to be down here just now—and I think you'd do well if you moved your establishment to town for a while. Your flat's big enough for you and your sister and brother, isn't it?"

"By gad, that's a good notion, and we'll do it!" answered Darrell. "Of course, the flat's big enough for the three of us, and we'll go at once—since that affair of the other night I'm a bit sick of this place. I say—we haven't heard a word of Miss Brock."

"The governess? No—that's another mystery," replied Hextall. "What do you know about her?"

"Nothing! Paquita and I thought the young 'un ought to have a governess, you know, and we happened to mentioned it to Kesteven, and he immediately said he knew the very person, and got Miss Brock down. I say—do you think she knows anything about this affair?"

"That's a big question," replied Hextall. "Like the rest of them, it will not be answered just now. There's a vast lot of mystery about all this business, Tress, and I'm afraid we're only on the fringe of it. I'm anxious to know what Smith and his man have done."

He drove straight to Smith's chambers as soon as he reached London that afternoon, and found Smith closeted with Styler, and both absorbed in the contemplation of maps and papers. Before asking news

from them he told them of what had happened during the night, and of what Walters had told him. Both listened with deep interest and attention.

"That footman's evidence may be of the greatest importance, eventually," remarked Smith. "I hope he's the sort of fellow you can rely on. You're sure he is? Well, that's good. Of course, Kesteven was not shot where he was found! He was carried there—that's certain. We're getting on, Hextall—Styler and I have not been idle during the last twenty-four hours, I can assure you."

"I want to hear," said Hextall, glancing at Smith's paper-strewn desk.

"All right—you shall. First of all, you'll remember that I told you that Styler came up specially to search Tress's flat for that old suit of Kesteven's in which he'd previously found the marriage certificate—I told you, too, that Fowler had furnished him with a key of the flat?"

"I remember," said Hextall.

"Tell Dr. Hextall what you found when you visited the flat last night, Styler," commanded Smith, turning to his clerk with a whimsical grin.

"I found that somebody had been there before me, Dr. Hextall," responded Styler, with prompt alacrity. "Yes, sir—and with the same object. And whoever it was had gone straight for what he or she——"

"She—she!" murmured Smith "She—without reasonable doubt!"

"Well, for what she wanted," continued Styler. "Only, I'm not so certain about it being a she as you

are, sir. But there, in the room that Kesteven had, was the coat thrown on the bed, and somebody had ripped open the secret pocket, and, of course, the marriage certificate was gone!"

"But you have a copy?" said Hextall.

"We'd have much preferred the original," answered Smith, dryly. "However—it's escaped us. Still—we know where that marriage took place."

"Why do you insist on its being a woman who took it?" asked Hextall. "You say it was 'she'?"

"It was a woman," affirmed Smith. "And the woman was the governess—Miss Brock. Lay a million to one on it! Styler isn't so sure of that fact as I am—but we shall see. In the meantime, Hextall, we've solved the mystery of that strange chart. That is—Styler has. I told you Styler was uncommonly clever—he'll prove a modern Vidocq before he's done. Explain to Dr. Hextall, Styler."

Styler, who was in his usual state of inkiness, shuffled among the various papers which lay between him and Smith.

"You're perhaps a bit too confident, sir," he said, modestly. "You should have said that I think I've solved it. However, I don't think I'm far out. If you'll look at the drawing which Mr. Smith made, Dr. Hextall, you'll observe that it represents something very like a leg of mutton in shape; in fact, what you might call a very irregular sort of triangle. And you'll see that there are figures at certain parts of that drawing, and that the figures refer to letters at the foot. Now, after I'd puzzled my brains over this

thing all last night and part of this morning, it suddenly struck me that this is a chart referring to some part of the coast. Obviously, then, the thing to do was to get a map and look at our coastline. And when I got the map, the whole thing became plain. Look here! This rough chart represents Portland with a bit of the mainland. The letter W indicates Weymouth. The letters PP mean Portland Prison. The letters K of D are plainly meant to indicate a certain roadside tavern, marked on this recent ordnance map, and called the *King of Denmark*. The letter C certainly refers to that cove, a mile or two from the *King of Denmark*, on the beach. What do you say, Dr. Hextall?"

"A clever explanation, Styler!" said Hextall.

"Well, of course, it all depends on the conjunction of letters," continued Styler. "But one can't help seeing that there they are, at Portland, and there's no other part of the coast where they do occur in conjunction—no part where a W, a PP, a K of D, and a C, come together. Well, now for the rest. You see what this line says: 'Any evening, 12th—18th: 8½—9½'? I take that to mean that somebody——"

"Meaning Tickell—if that's his right name," murmured Smith.

"Somebody—probably Tickell—could meet somebody else, either at the *King of Denmark* public-house or at that cove, any evening between the 12th and the 18th instant, any time from half-past eight to half-past nine. And as for the letters P and C, and the words which follow them, they're plain enough.

P means *Password*, and the password is *Endeavours*, C means *Countersign*, and the countersign is *Accomplishment*. So I make out, anyway."

Smith looked at Hextall with a smile of sly pride in his clerk's cleverness.

"Ingenious young hand, isn't he?" he chuckled. "You'll see that'll all turn out to be absolutely correct—certain!"

"What do you suppose it refers to?" asked Hextall.

Smith and Styler exchanged glances. Both smiled.

"Ah!" replied Smith. "Well, we may tell you, as you're in the swim with us. As Portland is undoubtedly the place, we believe this precious scrawl refers to some scheme connected with some gentleman who is now undergoing penal servitude at that establishment. And as there are still some days to elapse before the 18th is reached, Styler and myself are leaving for Weymouth by the first express to-morrow morning—to investigate matters on the exact spot."

CHAPTER XVII

MISS BROCK

HEXTALL smiled at Smith's sleuth-hound-like eagerness and rose to go. But the barrister stopped him.

"Wait a bit," he said. "That's not all. Since we've told you so much, Hextall, we may as well tell you more. I think you'll remember that when we were talking in the garden at Lynne Court, yesterday afternoon, I mentioned to you that Styler, during his short visit to the place, had made an interesting discovery, and had returned to town to investigate certain matters in connexion with it?"

"I remember," replied Hextall.

"And I also said that I'd tell you about that discovery later on?" continued Smith. "Very good; I'll tell you now, so that you'll have all these facts in mind. You possibly remember that when you and I and Styler first got down to Lynne we had a conversation with Fowler and the police-inspector at the inn, after which you and I walked up to the house together, leaving Styler to attend to—other matters? Very good—now, in the course of his attention to those matters, Styler came across a pleasant little bungalow, set in the woods near Lynne Court, in a clearing situate about half a mile from the spot where Kesteven's body was found. He had heard of that bungalow from the landlord of the inn, who told him that it had

recently been taken, furnished by an elderly gentleman, one Mr. Samuel Pegge. Styler, chancing upon this rural retreat, looked cautiously through its hedge, and there he saw Mr. Pegge himself engaged in the bucolic task of planting cabbages. Imagine that, Hextall! Only that very morning, a few brief hours previously, a murder of a peculiarly mysterious kind had taken place within half a mile of him, yet here was Mr. Pegge calmly planting cabbages with an agricultural instrument which, I believe, is called a dibble! I say, imagine it!"

"I'd rather hear what you have to tell, Smith," said Hextall. "We'll leave the imagination out."

"Our profession wouldn't be much use without an occasional exercise of imagination," retorted Smith, solemnly. "To me, the rural occupations of Mr. Samuel Pegge on that morning are possessed of a rare significance, and may possibly—but you don't see what I mean, Hextall, so I'll go on to plain fact. Mr. Pegge had discarded his coat, the weather being warm—that coat was lying within Styler's reach. When Mr. Pegge went into his bungalow to dine, or lunch, Styler, being the smart and resourceful investigator that he is, examined the contents of a pocket-book which lay in the inside pocket of that coat. And there he made the astounding discovery that he was in the presence—in the actual presence, for he saw Mr. Pegge through the open window—of one of the most celebrated of modern—criminals!"

"Who?" asked Hextall.

"Septimus Philcox," replied Smith, nodding his head gravely. "Septimus Philcox! What—the name doesn't recall anything to you? Well, well!—but I forget that this was a commercial matter, and that you don't take an interest in such things. Septimus Philcox, my dear Hextall, was the head and front of the famous Imperial Splendour gang. Turn up a newspaper file of twelve years or so ago, and you'll know all about the Imperial Splendour affair—rather! The Imperial Splendour Development and Enterprise Society was one of the biggest frauds ever shoved down the throats of a gullible public. Philcox was its head, its front, its life, its soul—and in the end Philcox got fourteen years—seven on each of the two indictments, *not* to run concurrently—and his principal satellites got lesser terms. And a few months ago, Philcox, having been a model convict—those sort of chaps always are, you know—was released on licence, only to disappear again from public view, and to entrench himself in a pretty bungalow, and to plant cabbages, under the name of Samuel Pegge. You follow me?"

"How," asked Hextall, "how did Styler know that Mr. Samuel Pegge was Septimus Philcox?"

"A proper question," said Smith. "But easily answered. You are probably aware that all persons of a criminal nature are not only inordinately vain, but are also morbidly fond of hearing and reading anything about themselves. Now, in that pocket-book Styler found a mass of newspaper cuttings—accounts of Philcox's trial and so on. But he also found a much

more important document—Philcox's licence. A licence, my dear Hextall, is what used to be called a ticket-of-leave. When Styler saw that he knew in whose presence he was. And according to Styler, the once great head of the Imperial Splendour Society is a very hale and hearty old gentleman who is enjoying himself in the evening of his ill-spent days. Eh?"

"I suppose the police know that Samuel Pegge is Septimus Philcox?" suggested Hextall.

"The Scotland Yard people do, of course," replied Smith. "We have a friend or two there—Styler held converse with them yesterday. Oh, yes, they know! You see, Philcox has a couple of respectable sons, and they allow the old chap a sufficient income to enable him to live in similar respectability. And you may be sure that there isn't a soul in the neighbourhood of Lynne Court who suspects that Mr. Samuel Pegge is one and the same with the Septimus Philcox whose nefarious deeds were matter of so much public attention twelve years ago!"

"Well?" said Hextall.

"Well—what?" asked Smith.

"Do you think there's any connexion between Philcox or Pegge, and what's just happened?" inquired Hextall. "Do you think that Pegge was mixed up at all with Kesteven, or Tickell?"

"I don't now what we think—yet," replied Smith, looking at Styler, who had listened eagerly to the narrative of his own doings. "But we do know that Philcox was only released from Portland, on licence, a few months ago, and that on Tickell has been found a

chart, or map, or whatever you like to call it, which most certainly—in our opinion—has to do with Portland. And I think Styler and I will know more before many days are over.”

“And you go down there at once?” asked Hextall.

“We go down to Weymouth to-morrow morning—by the very first express from Paddington,” replied Smith. “Naturally, we shall take the strictest precautions. Those precautions will begin now—our motto, my dear Hextall, is Thoroughness. I shall be a tourist gentleman, in the usual tourist get-up of loud tweeds—I may throw in a little touch of the amateur artist, and carry a sketch-book, for I can use my pencil. As for Styler, he will be a motor-bicyclist, holiday-making, and will be accompanied by his machine. We shan’t know each other at Paddington, and though we shall put up at the same hotel in Weymouth, we shall be strangers to each other until we foregather casually—quite casually—in the smoking-room. Quite casually, too, quite accidentally, you know, we shall both drop in at the *King of Denmark* wayside inn, to-morrow evening, between the hours of half-past eight and half-past nine—just to see what offers. And we shall be there—at least one or other of us will be there—every evening until the eighteenth is come and gone.”

“Let me suggest an improvement,” said Hextall, with a smile. “Wouldn’t it be far better if one of you put up—as a tourist—at the *King of Denmark*?”

Styler made a murmur of approval and Smith, after a moment's consideration, nodded in acquiescence.

"Good!" he said. "No doubt it would. If one can find accommodations; and if they haven't got it there, they'll no doubt be able to find a room in some neighbouring cottage. Styler, that will have to be me—I'll be an artist, wanting to make sketches of the coast scenery. Then you can nip in and out of Weymouth on your machine. Good suggestion, Hextall—thank you."

Hextall made Smith promise to keep him informed of what came of this excursion, and went off Westward. It was then six o'clock in the evening, and as he walked up the Strand, to make a call at a surgical instrument shop, it suddenly occurred to him that as he had not wired to his housekeeper with respect to his return there would be no dinner ready for him at home. He had lunched early at Lynne Court and now he was hungry. Accordingly, having paid his visit to the surgical instrument maker, he turned into Charing Cross railway station, intending to dine in the restaurant. And going first to the bookstall, with a view to the purchase of a newspaper or two wherewith to solace himself during a lonely meal, he suddenly caught sight of Miss Brock.

The governess had evidently gone to the bookstall on a like mission to his own. She was, in fact, just concluding the purchase of a magazine, and it was a fortunate thing that her attention was taken up by counting the change which a bookstall-attendant had

just handed to her. Fortunately, too, the station was at that hour crowded with business men, going homeward. Hextall drew back amongst the crowds and kept his eyes on the slight, quietly-dressed figure. He was vaguely perplexed by this encounter. It was surely his duty to keep Miss Brock in sight, now that she had accidentally come within his view—perhaps, indeed, he ought to go up and speak to her. A constitutional diffidence and shyness held him back—after all, what right had he to interfere with Miss Brock's movements? And while he hesitated, Miss Brock put her change in her purse, picked up her magazine, and, turning away, crossed the platform and disappeared within the restaurant. She, too, was presumably intent on refreshment.

Hextall waited a little, hanging about, always watching the door through which the governess had passed. Eventually, still uncomfortably indecisive, he went up to that door, walked a little way within, and looked round. Then he saw Miss Brock again. She was sitting at a little table in a far corner; a bill-of-fare was in her hand; a waiter stood attentive at her side. It was very evident that Miss Brock was going to dine.

Hextall drew back quickly, possessed of a sudden splendid inspiration. He hurried to the nearest telephone box, hastily turned over the leaves of a directory, and rang up Smith's chambers in the Temple. In another minute he was hailed by Styler. Smith, said Styler, had just gone, but he, Styler, was very much there.

"Then get yourself into a taxi this instant and come here to me at the booking-office, Charing Cross—main line, as fast as you can," commanded Hextall. "Don't lose a second, even in replying—most important!"

He was so sure of Styler's immediate obedience that he rang off and hurried out of the box to find a good vantage ground wherefrom to keep an eye on the door of the restaurant. Now and then he kept strolling into the booking-hall, and within ten minutes Styler ran up to him.

"Good man!" exclaimed Hextall. He pulled the clerk along to the platform and pointed to the door behind which Miss Brock was doubtless calmly eating. "Styler," he said, "Miss Brock—the governess—you know—is in there!"

Styler's sharp features became more ferret-like than ever; Styler's eyes glistened.

"Alone?" he asked.

"Alone. Now do you know her—did you see her at Lynne Court? You didn't? Then go a little way within the door, and you will see her. She's at a table at the far side, in the right-hand corner—a slight, fair-haired young woman, in a plain, dark coat and skirt—you can't mistake her. Her—her hat's a bit on one side, I believe."

Styler glided away, and in two minutes was back again.

"All right," he said. "I've seen her."

"What next?" asked Hextall. "She ought to be—eh?"

"I'll follow her," replied Styler. "She doesn't know me. You be off, doctor. Leave it all to me. I've nothing to do but to make ready for to-morrow's journey, and I can sit up all night to do that. Look here—I'll drop in at your house later, and tell you about her movements."

Hextall went away and dined elsewhere, and later he drove home and spent the evening listening to the report of the *locum tenens* who had looked after his patients during his absence. And in the course of the evening in came Styler, imperturbable and confident as ever.

"I followed her," said Styler, when he and Hextall were alone. "She spent some time over her dinner, too! But she came out at last, and she took a taxi and drove to a certain house in Kensington. And she hadn't gone into it many minutes when up came another taxi and set down—Mrs. Renton! So there's another little link in the chain, doctor, and it'll have to be examined when Mr. Smith and I return from where we're going."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SEA-CAPTAIN

TOWARDS sunset of the next day, a short, stoutish gold-spectacled gentleman, who wore a deerstalker hat, a suit of very loud-patterned tweed, gaily coloured stockings, and conspicuous brogue shoes, and who carried a sketch-book in one hand, and a faded green umbrella in the other, stood on the edge of a cliff which over-looked a tiny cove that lay silent and deserted amongst the western rocks of Portland Bill. Beneath him lay the grey waters which stretch in a wide, little-ship-frequented bay from Portland to the mouth of the Exe; on his right hand, growing less and less distinct as the daylight faded into twilight, and the twilight into the first shades of the night, the cliffs and headlands of Dorset rose above that vast expanse of rock and pebble which folk call the Chesil Beach. And behind him rose the encampments and ramparts of the Bill, known to all the world as the promontory or semi-isle whereon one of our biggest convict establishments is housed, and not so well known, save to tourists, as a very busy and thickly-populated community of little towns and villages. Smith was already familiar with this country. He had more than once, holiday-making, crossed that tiresomely long and weary road which leads from the mainland to the ancient Isle of Vindilis which, in these times under its

new name of Portland, gives a title to a duke and houses many ne'er-do-wells until their various offences are purged. He knew all about its history, from the times when it was inhabited by the ancient Baleares, the stone-slingers. He had visited all its famous places: Fortune's Well, and Deadman's Bay, and Bow-and-Arrow Castle, and Pennsylvania. And he had often stopped to read those notice-boards which appear at frequent intervals on these wild and strong wastes, whereon are set forth the pains and penalties which await people who do anything towards aiding and abetting in the escape of the prisoners in the great, gaunt buildings on the heights. There was one of these boards just behind the spot on which he stood, and he turned and read its warning before the sun sank behind the far-off hills of distant Devonshire.

It was drastic and plain enough, that notice. It was addressed to beings known as "free persons"—which seemed to argue that, in the opinion of the authorities, there were only two classes of individuals in the world: those who were safely incarcerated in Portland Prison, and those who were not. Such free persons were plainly informed that any attempt to aid prisoners to escape would be treated as a felony, and the wrongdoer would not enjoy the benefits of bail or mainprise—in other words, if the law caught him, the law would hold him securely until he himself was convicted and sentenced. There were, however, sops of a substantial sort held out to these free persons. If a free person chanced, by sheer good luck

or pure accident, to find clothing, or letters, or money, evidently, or presumably, or supposititiously, left to further the escape of prisoners, and took such money, or letters, or clothing, to the proper authorities, they would reward him—unless they suspected and proved him to have been in collusion with some person meaning to encourage such escape. Therefore, it had always seemed to Smith, you had to be careful in exploring Portland, lest you should be taken to be some one anxious to set free upon the world a convicted burglar, or fraudulent company promoter, or some other rascal who had been sent to quarry stone for five or seven or fifteen years.

“It is odds-on that Styler and I are unknowingly engaged in some such game!” mused Smith, as he turned landward. “If all this business doesn’t mean that, I’m a Hottentot!”

He and Styler had already made up their minds as to what the real meaning of the mysterious chart was. It referred, without doubt, to some conspiracy which had as its main object the release by escape of some prisoner now within those frowning walls. Their theory was that that prisoner was a friend, probably a past associate, of Kesteven or of Tickell, and that Kesteven had entrusted Tickell with money to further the matter. The money which Tickell had carried on him was probably meant as means for bribing warders, or officials, or—somebody. If the deciphered chart meant anything, it meant that Tickell, as agent, was to meet some person or persons on some evening between the 12th and the 18th, at the

King of Denmark, in order to arrange matters. Well, here was the 15th—the fifteenth day of May—half-way between the appointed limited dates? And though Tickell was not here, Smith and Styler were, and there, in a knoll beneath the high ground, stood the *King of Denmark*. All was ready: all in order, except one matter which, when Smith came to think of it, was of vast importance. He and Styler, after all, were only guessing at things, and of details they knew nothing.

“It’s a case of trusting to sheer luck,” soliloquized Smith. “And whatever I may have, Styler is one of those fellows who are gifted with superabundant luck—I shall leave most of this to Styler.”

He had succeeded, in his rôle of artist and holiday-maker, in getting a room at the inn, and he now strolled back there to eat his supper. The inn was a homely place enough; an old-fashioned, wayside hostelry set on a country road, half-way between an inland village of stone-quarriers and a beach village tenanted by fisher-folk. Its accommodation was primitive; its custom seemed to be small. And when Smith, having eaten a dish of eggs and bacon, which was all the place could afford him that night, went into the low-ceilinged bar-room to smoke his pipe and look out for whatever might chance, he found it untenanted save for the landlady, who was polishing glasses behind the bar.

But presently a man came in. He was a little man, dressed nattily in blue serge, cut in nautical fashion; a middle-aged man, who wore gold rings in his ears

and had a multitude of wrinkles about the corners of his eyes. His grizzled beard was cut torpedo fashion; he had a trick of jerking it up when he spoke; all his movements were quick and jerky. And as he made to the bar, he favoured Smith, who sat in a shady corner, with a sharp questioning look, which was withdrawn as rapidly as it was given.

"Evenin', Mother Basset!" said the new-comer cheerily. "A drop of the usual if you please, ma'am."

The landlady took down a bottle of rum, and poured a generous quantity into a tumbler, which she presently flanked with a sugar-bowl, and a jug of hot water.

"Evenin', Cap'n Polbeck," she answered. "You ain't agone yet, then?—thought as how you was goin' this week?"

The little man mixed his rum and water with a care that denoted years of custom and took an appreciative gulp.

"Don't go till the end o' the week, ma'am," he replied. "Twentieth, it is—four more days I have yet of England, home and beauty! Here's your jolly good health, Mother Bassett—and yours, sir, 'scusin' the liberty," he added, lifting his glass to Smith, who hastened to bow and lift his own. "Long life to all of us!"

"Same to you, cap'n," responded the landlady. "Off to the same parts you be goin', I reckon, same as what you do always trade to?"

"Just so, ma'am," replied Captain Polbeck. "What I've traded to any time and all times this five-and-twenty year. Barbadoes — Tobago — Trinidad — Georgetown—them's my places of call, Mother Bassett, as well you know, me having brought you many a nice little parcil o' goods from one or other of 'em," he added, with a wink which embraced Smith. "Nice goods to be picked up on them coasts, ma'am."

Smith lost interest in Captain Polbeck. He, clearly, was not the man, or one of the men, whom he and Styler wanted to meet. He opened a guide-book and began to read, leaving the seafarer and the landlady to talk in their own fashion. But before he had turned a page, the outer door opened, and in came a young man in overalls and goggles, a motor-cyclist, well powdered with white dust. And Smith gave him one glance and dipped into his book again.

Styler pulled off his gauntlets, slapped the dust off them, and advancing to the bar, demanded some innocuous refreshment. He passed the time of day with the landlady and Captain Polbeck; within five minutes he was in hearty converse with the seaman. Then Smith began to prick up his ears, for Styler was leading the conversation over several byways, and was using many fine words. He had now got Captain Polbeck into a corner, and had treated him to a cigar, and he was just discussing Captain Scott and his Antarctic venture, just then beginning.

"Aye, well, mister," at last said Styler, in casual tones. "It'll be a difficult endeavour, that—a very difficult endeavour!"

Smith almost jumped in his seat. What was the impetuous Styler after? *Endeavour!*—that was the password! In spite of himself, Smith could not refrain from glancing out of his eye-corners at the little seafarer. And he saw Polbeck give Styler a peculiarly meaning look.

“Endeavour?” he said. “Aye—aye! But not so difficult of accomplishment as you think.”

Accomplishment!—the countersign! So this was the man—this little person who traded with the West Indian ports and with British Guiana, of which Georgetown is the capital! What, then, were all the preconceived notions which he and Styler had——

He looked up to see Styler and Captain Polbeck leave the bar-room and go out into the night. Oh, this was the man sure enough! Well, Styler was a sharp customer and might be trusted to know what he was about. Styler would——

Even as he speculated on what was happening, Styler strolled into the bar-room again, ostentatiously picked up a road-map which he had left lying on the table, and, again retiring, gave his master a knowing wink. And Smith presently got up, stretched his arms, made a remark to the landlady about the evening, and went out.

Styler was waiting for him within the deep stone porch. He led Smith into the road and pointed to a figure strolling along the road a little distance away, outlined against the glow in the western sky.

“This is the chap!” whispered Styler. “He fully believes we’re the persons he was to meet. But I

don't understand it at all—it's not with Portland—you know what I mean, sir—that we're dealing. And the thing to do is to act as if we knew everything, and to let him talk—then we'll find out. Leave it to me, sir—I've said that you're the gentleman that's to arrange the money part of it."

Captain Polbeck turned and met them as they went up the lonely road. He shook hands with Smith effusively.

"Servant, sir!" he whispered. "Shiver me if I didn't wonder if you was the gentleman, or one of 'em, as I was to meet. I give you a look as I come in, and I see you look at me. But p'raps you was a-waiting for an opportunity to give the word?"

"You're right, captain. I was waiting," answered Smith.

"'Zactly, and quite right—can't be too careful in these matters," said the captain. "This here other gentleman, however, he worked that there password into his talk clever, he did. 'Endeavor', says he!—just so. And 'accomplishment,' says I—to be sure! Good!—and now we can have our bit of talk, gentlemen."

"We'll hear your plans, captain," said Styler. "Then we can talk about the money. I suppose it's safe, talking here?"

"Safe enough, sir—ain't nobody about just here at this time o' night," said Polbeck. "Well, plans now. Simple and plain they be. This way it is—I sails from Weymouth on the twentieth—I calls at these

West Indian ports first, and then I goes on to Georgetown. There I stops a fortnight, taking in my cargo of Demerara sugar. During that fortnight this man'll be brought along country to me—from them French settlements. The time they'll want'll be four days. That'll give them as has it in hand four days to go up, after I strike Georgetown, a day or two to get him away, four days to bring him along. Then they put him aboard me, and I brings him straight home to England. All this, of course, if I takes 'em the money, and gets my share. You've the money ready, I reckon, gentlemen?"

Styler contrived to nudge Smith, and took the answer to this question upon himself.

"The money's all right, captain," he answered. "Now, just to be businesslike, what's the exact amount agreed upon? Of course, we've our memorandum of it, but we'd like a formal statement from you."

"Just so—just so!" agreed Polbeck. "That's business. The amount is what I expect was written from across yonder to them as you represent, gentlemen. Three thousand pound for them; five hundred for me. Half of mine to be paid now; t'other half when I land him here in England. This money, the three thousand, I'm to take out. And my special instructions, gentlemen, is—gold!"

CHAPTER XIX

HALF A BIRD IN THE HAND

AGAIN Styler nudged his master: again he became mouthpiece.

"Gold?" he said. "All right, captain—English sovereigns, of course?"

"English sovereigns is the word, sir," answered Polbeck. "Nothing like 'em in the way of that metal, gentlemen!"

"Well, of course, we don't carry three thousand sovereigns in our waistcoat pockets," remarked Styler. "But we carry what can soon be turned into 'em. You'll have to meet us in Weymouth, captain, to-morrow."

"Right you are, sir," responded Polbeck. "Wherever and whenever you please, gentlemen. Now, I lives, when at home, in this village behind here, but Weymouth sees me every day. To-morrow, says you?—now, what hour, and where?"

Smith replied to that question.

"Noon—outside the General Post Office," he said. "That do for you, captain?"

"Suit me precisely, sir," answered Polbeck. "I go in every morning to see what's going on with the loading of my ship—I'm taking out a general cargo to them West Indian ports. About the packing o' that

gold, now, gentlemen?—three thousand sovereigns make a tidy weight. If so be as you could have it put in stout bags at the bank, I could bring a couple of hefty chaps along of me to carry it.”

“Meet us first and we can soon arrange that,” said Smith. “You could take it down to your ship in a cab, you know. Noon, then, to-morrow, outside the post office.”

Polbeck presently said good night and went off up the road, evidently quite unsuspecting and highly satisfied, and Smith and Styler, instead of turning back into the inn, walked away towards the cliffs. The last glow of sunset had died out in the west, and the night was setting in dark and heavy over land and sea. Few scenes could possibly have looked more deserted or solitary; nevertheless, both men felt a sense of fear about talking openly.

“Careful, Styler,” whispered Smith. “You don’t know who may be about, in these quarters. Yet we must talk. Now that we’ve seen that chap, I wish I was in Weymouth.”

“Easy done,” answered Styler. “Ride back on my motor-bike. You can sit behind, sir, and I’ll go steady. As you say, you never know what ears there may be around here—besides, that doesn’t look over comfortable a spot, and we’ve done all that’s necessary.”

A retreat to Weymouth seemed the most advisable proceeding, and Smith returned to the inn, made an excuse to and settled up with his landlady, got

his small impedimenta, and went back to the road to find Styler arranging his machine. An hour later, the two were in a quiet bedroom in a comfortable hotel, with the materials for a nightcap between them, and their joint faculties turned at full on the problem of the moment.

"Styler," said Smith, "this is not at all what we fancied it was going to be. This is no question of aiding and abetting in an escape from the convict prison at Portland. It's something of a similar nature, without doubt, but on very different lines and of different colour and significance, and we may thank our lucky stars that Captain Polbeck fell into everything as simply and easily as he did. Now, what have you made of it, so far?"

"That there's some scheme afoot to bring some Englishman across from somewhere; that somebody wants three thousand pounds for their share in the matter; that Polbeck wants five hundred for his," answered Styler. "Beyond that, sir, I haven't gone—can't go."

"I've gone beyond that," said Smith. "This it is, in my view of things. This chap, Polbeck, is evidently master of a trading vessel—small schooner, I should think—in which he makes periodical voyages to the West Indies, Barbadoes, Tobago, Trinidad, and so on, and to Georgetown, in British Guiana. In British Guiana, mind you, Styler! Now, do you know anything about Guiana?"

“Not much, sir, except that it’s in South America,” answered Styler. “But I’ll know more before ten o’clock to-morrow, if there’s a reference library in this town.”

“Well, I know sufficient to keep us going to-night,” remarked Smith. “Guiana is a biggish tract of country on the north-east corner of South America. It’s divided up—so far as European Powers are concerned—between Great Britain, Holland, and France, so there’s British Guiana, Dutch Guiana, and French Guiana. Now, Georgetown is the capital of British Guiana—it’s a place of some size, a port of some importance. But we’re not concerned with Georgetown, Styler, except in so far as it’s the port at which Polbeck expects to take on board this—somebody. What we’re concerned with is French Guiana—from whence that somebody’s to be brought. Do you guess why French Guiana concerns us?”

“At present—no!” replied Styler.

“Then I’ll tell you. We’re concerned with it, and the mysterious somebody who’s to be brought from it, because French Guiana, Styler, is the colony to which our neighbours across the Channel yonder, send their convicts—the long-term lot of ’em, at any rate. So that—do you see?”

“The somebody is probably a French convict!” exclaimed Styler.

“Precisely, my son! A French convict—and, presumably, one who has been sentenced for some very grave offence. I remember sufficient on this point to

tell you that at one time the French Government tried the experiment of penal colonies in this Guiana territory; it didn't answer, but they still send convicts there, to Cayenne, and to some of the adjacent islands—the famous Captain Dreyfus was confined in the notorious Devil's Island there. Now, bearing all these things in mind, Styler, I work it out like this—this somebody is a French convict——”

“Might be an Englishman convicted in France,” suggested Styler.

“Excellent notion, Styler—so he might, or may be. Anyway, a convict confined in French Guiana, who has old associates here in England that can afford to do something for his release. I'm imagining that Kesteven was one of them, that Tickell is possibly another. I take it that there's somebody over there, probably in Georgetown, who can work this man's escape; that he or they have been in communication with the men on this side, and that Polbeck is a mere go-between. And there are three weighty matters on my mind. The first is: how far is Kesteven's murder, if at all, connected with this plot? The second is: has Samuel Pegge, alias Septimus Philcox, anything to do with it? The third is: how much more about it does Captain Polbeck know than he has told you or me? The first two of these matters we can leave at present; they'll infallibly be worked out in time. The third we must somehow tackle at once.”

Styler considered this in silence for awhile.

"There's this to be remembered, sir," he said at last. "Polbeck admitted to us that all he was to get out of the job was five hundred pounds."

"Exactly!" said Smith. "I'm on the same line of thought, Styler. And I'll act on it to-morrow."

In pursuance of this resolve, Smith was at the telegraph office as soon as it opened next morning, and by five minutes past eight he had sent off a wire to Darrell Tress asking him if he would authorize him, Smith, to lay out a couple of hundred pounds in relation to the Kesteven affair. Darrell's answer, delivered to Smith as he and Styler sat at breakfast, was characteristic. Smith could lay out a couple of thousand if he liked; he, Darrell, was only too delighted to hear that he was at work.

"An excellent thing, Styler, to have a young man of great possessions behind you," remarked Smith dryly, as he handed Darrell's telegram to his clerk. "Now we shall be able to tackle our mariner friend to some purpose. So far as I could judge from what I saw of Captain Polbeck last night, I should say that he's the sort of man who would certainly hold that even half a bird in the hand is worth a dozen in the bush. We'll try him, anyway."

A visit to a local banker, the exchange of a telegram with Smith's own bankers in London, placed a couple of crisp hundred-pound notes in his hands long before noon. And with noon came Captain Polbeck, alert and ready to carry out his share of the transaction. He showed no surprise when Smith and Sty-

ler conducted him to a quiet corner of the smoking-room of their hotel, and bestowed hospitality upon him in the form of rum and cigars. But his surprise was deep and long and continuous when Smith, with legal lucidity and thoroughness, told him the plain truth, and his face grew longer and longer as he realized that his chance of earning five hundred pounds for a comparatively easy job was slipping, nay, had already slipped away. His rum grew cold, his cigar went out, he looked at these two much-too-smart gentlemen with something very like disgust.

"My luck!" he said with sudden despair. "I was a-goin' to buy the little house I live in with that there five hundred! Well!—I always felt there was something undeniably risky in that business. All off, is it? Then I may as well bid you good day."

"Not yet, captain," said Smith. "Take a fresh cigar, replenish your glass—and look at these articles."

He held the two bank-notes under Polbeck's eyes, and the sea-captain started.

"Yours!—if you'll tell us what we want to know," continued Smith. "Come, now, you're not bound to any of these people. Tell us all you know—every detail—about this affair, and when you've done you can pick those notes up. See!"

He laid the bank-notes on the table and set a tumbler on them. And Styler, watching Captain Polbeck with a keen gaze, saw his eyes glisten.

"Well, gentlemen," said he, evidently greatly relieved, "that's a fair offer, and I'll take it. But don't

you be disappointed if I don't seem to be able to tell a great deal. I'll tell you the truth, anyhow."

"That'll do," remarked Simth. "That's all we want."

"Well, then, 'twas this here way," continued Polbeck. "Last time I was in Georgetown, which is about four months ago, a stranger that sort of cultivated my acquaintance at a certain tavern, asked me if I'd like to earn five hundred pound. Nat'rally, I said I would—if the job was all square. Then he said it was to help in the escape of an Englishman who'd been wrongfully convicted in France and sent to this French convict settlement at Cayenne—for life."

"For life!" exclaimed Smith.

"For life, sir. A commercial offence—fraud o' some sort—nothing in the way of murder, nor yet violence, otherwise I wouldn't ha' touched the matter, even if it was a wrongful conviction, which it might be and again it mightn't. However, being what this man said it was, and an Englishman being concerned, and Cayenne being another name for hell, I agreed. Then we went into details. This man said that there was powerful and influential folks here in England as would find the money necessary, which was three thousand. I was to act as go-between, and carry that money in gold back to Georgetown. He wanted to know some place here where I could meet the agents of these folks to take the money. So as I live in that village where you was last night, I suggested the *King o' Denmark* as a likely place, and after reckoning dates and times up, I told him I could look in there

every night between the twelfth and eighteenth of May this spring. And every night I have looked in, and last night you turned up—and that's really all I know," concluded Captain Polbeck, eyeing the bank-notes. "Can't think of any more, nohow."

"Did you hear the name of the man whose escape was being planned?" asked Smith.

"Never, sir! All I heard was that he was to be brought to me at Georgetown and that I was to land him in England—Falmouth, Plymouth, here—anywhere."

"Who was the man who was arranging things?" asked Styler.

"Couldn't say, neither. He was a fellow that used to drop in at this tavern I told you of—a good many seafaring men goes there, and it strikes me he was on the look-out for a man likely to do the job."

"Did he by any chance tell you how long this Englishman had been at Cayenne?" asked Smith.

"Ah, now!" answered Polbeck. "That he did mention! Six years."

Smith asked the captain no further questions. When Polbeck had taken the bank-notes and departed, he turned to Styler.

"Now then!" he said. "The next thing will be—a search of the French criminal records. Nice job, Styler—but it can and must be done. It's our only chance, unless——"

A waiter came up to the corner in which they sat, carrying a telegram on his salver.

"Mr. Smith—Mr. John Smith? Wire for you, sir."

Smith tore open the envelope. And Styler, leaning nearer in response to his master's beckoning nod, read the message with him:

"Superintendent of Police, Lynchfield, has just wired that Tickell died suddenly in hospital ten o'clock this morning.

"TRESS."

CHAPTER XX

THE WREATH AND THE CHARM

SMITH deliberately folded up Darrell's telegram, put it carefully away in one pocket, and from another drew out a map which he proceeded to spread over the table at which he and Styler sat.

"Styler," he said, "we must be off to Lynchfield at once. If there's anything to hear in connexion with Tickell's death we must hear it. And the thing is—how to get there as soon as possible? Here we are, at Weymouth—there's Lynchfield—sixty to seventy miles away as I make it. And so far as I can see, it's a roundabout, cross-country railway journey, involving several changes. What about a motorcar?"

"A motor-car for you—I can ride my motor-bike," replied Styler. "It's half-past twelve exactly—we can be there by four o'clock. And you wouldn't do it any quicker by train. There's a garage close by this hotel—shall I go and order the best car I can get?"

"At once," agreed Smith. "Meanwhile I'll settle our bills and have some food put up for us—we must munch on the way. This death of Tickell is important, Styler—it'll lead to fresh developments. Off you

Master and man spent the next three hours in racing across slices of two counties and the whole of one.

Just before the town clock struck four they dashed up to the police station at Lynchfield and were presently shown into the presence of the superintendent who had accompanied Smith and Hextall and Darrell to the cottage into which Tickell had been carried after his accident. The superintendent recognized Smith at once.

"Ah," he said. "I suppose you've heard, then? The man's dead."

"Mr. Tress wired to me," answered Smith. "You understand?—I'm looking after this affair in his interests. Tickell died suddenly, I suppose?"

"Complications set in, and he died very suddenly this morning—collapse," said the superintendent laconically. "So—there's an end of that."

Smith was about to remark that this was probably but a beginning, but he remembered that the official mind only works in a certain way, and he refrained.

"I suppose you've no further information?" he asked. "Nothing more come to light—here?"

"Nothing! We've heard nothing—found out nothing. Have you?" replied the superintendent, turning on his questioner quizzically. "You amateur gentlemen—excuse the phrase!—are sometimes better hands than we are, you know."

"Nothing about Tickell," answered Smith. "I know no more about him than I did when I was here the other day."

"Well, it's a queer business, in my opinion," remarked the superintendent. "There's been a lot of publicity in the newspapers—I've been nearly mad-

dened by those confounded reporters!—and I suppose folks have talked the thing well over, from Land's End to John o' Groats, and yet nobody's come forward to identify this man. It's extraordinary!"

"Nobody's come forward to identify Kesteven, for that matter," said Smith.

"There you are again!" exclaimed the superintendent. "Two of 'em! Might have dropped from the clouds, or been thrown up by the sea, for anything that anybody seems to know of 'em. Surely somebody must have known Kesteven and Tickell as well! They may, of course, have been living under assumed names of late, but then, we've had their portraits in every newspaper that prints such things. And yet nobody comes forward to tell anything about them! Now, didn't Mr. Tress say at that inquest that he met Kesteven at some race-meeting? Oh, yes, Newbury—well, if Kesteven was a frequenter of race-courses, somebody must have known him. What's this silence mean?"

"That's is precisely what I'm endeavouring to find out," replied Smith. "And as there's evidently nothing to be learnt here, I'll journey further."

"Oh, we know nothing," said the superintendent. "All we know is that the man suspected of shooting Kesteven came into our hands as the result of an accident and has died from his injuries without our learning a single thing about him. That's all. And as I said—there's an end of that. But now, look here," he added, as Smith began making for the door; "between you and me, Mr. Smith, do you think this

chap who's lying dead up there really did murder Kesteven?"

"No!" replied Smith. "I don't."

"Just so," said the superintendent with a smile. "Have you any idea who did? In strict confidence, you know, Mr. Smith."

"In strict confidence—I haven't," answered Smith. "I've no more idea than that desk of yours has or ever could have. But I'm just as certain that Tickell didn't."

"Well, it's a queer business," said the superintendent. "I never knew a queerer one. Have you?"

"Yes," replied Smith, opening the door. "Half a dozen!"

The superintendent laughed incredulously, and Smith and Styler left him and went out into the street.

"What next?" asked Styler. "There's nothing to be done here."

Smith jumped into his car.

"Lynne Court, Styler," he said. "We'll see how things are going there. Give the driver a lead if you know the way—if you don't, I'll direct him."

But Styler who had studied a road-map while he ate sandwiches and drank ale at a wayside inn, went on ahead and set a good pace towards Lynne, and before five o'clock led the motorcar into the usually quiet street of the village. That afternoon, however, the street was anything but quiet—all around the churchyard quantities of people were gathered, and in the churchyard itself more people were grouped about one particular place. And on Smith pulling up

his car outside the *Lynne Arms* and making inquiry as to the reason of this commotion he was informed by the landlord, who came out to greet him and Styler, as well-remembered customers, that Kesteven's body had been buried that afternoon, and that all these folk had come from far and near out of sheer curiosity.

"Quiet affair it's been, sir, apart from all this," he went on to say, with a wave of the hand towards the people, many of whom were now making towards his own door. "Nobody there, sir, except Mr. Tress, in the way of mourners—Mr. Tress and one or two of his servants, anyway. Queer thing, sir, that no relatives or friends of his shouldn't turn up."

"Very!" replied Smith. He got out of the motor-car and signed to Styler to follow him. Together they crossed the road to the churchyard and went up to Kesteven's grave. The sexton had just finished relaying the turf upon it, and on this, as Smith approached, he was placing a wreath of violets.

"Look at that, Styler!" whispered Smith, as they reached the spot. "A wreath of violets! Now, I wonder who remembered Kesteven with such sufficient sentiment as to induce him or her to send that?"

Styler stooped down and turned the wreath over.

"No card fixed to it, Mr. Smith," he observed.

Smith looked at the sexton, who was collecting his tools.

"Do you know who put this wreath on the grave?" he asked.

"I do, sir," answered the sexton, promptly. "I did."

"I suppose somebody sent it to you to place there, then?" asked Smith. "Come, I'm not asking out of any idle curiosity. You've seen me before, you know—at the inquest."

"Oh, I don't mind telling aught that I know," replied the man readily, slipping into his pocket a couple of coins which Smith offered him. "I don't know that there's any secret about it. If you'll come this way, sir, I'll show you."

He led them up the churchyard path into a gloomy chamber in the base of the tower, a place evidently set apart for spades, mattocks, shovels, cords, all the gruesome paraphernalia necessary for preparing the last homes of the dead. And there he pointed to a cardboard box which lay carelessly thrown on an old beech table, with a crumpled sheet of typewriting paper lying at its side.

"I got that box, with that there wreath in it, by this morning's post," he said. "And that letter lying on top of the wreath, with a five-shilling postal order pinned to. You can see what the letter says—it's in printed characters, like."

Smith picked up the sheet of paper and read the type-written message.

"Will the sexton at Lynne please place this wreath on John Kesteven's grave?"

"Of course," remarked the sexton, "it doesn't say who it comes from, do it, now?"

Smith took up the lid of the box. There was a clue, anyway. The lid bore a printed label—Hetherton, Florist, Gloucester Road, S. W. He turned away with a look at Styler.

"I suppose Mr. Tress came to the funeral?" he asked, as they left the tower.

"Mr. Tress and two of his servants, sir—butler and valet," answered the sexton. "Nobody else—'ceptin' that crowd o' gapers."

"Mr. Tress has gone back to Lynne Court, I suppose?" said Smith. "How long ago?"

"No, sir—Mr. Tress has gone off to London," replied the sexton. "Him and his man—Fowler—went straight away from the gate yonder, as soon as this funeral was over. I heard, this morning, that they were off—the Court's going to be shut up for a time, 'ceptin' for two or three servants."

"Has Miss Tress gone too, then?" inquired Smith.

"I see Miss Tress and some nurses go through the village this morning, with the little boy," said the sexton. "Ain't nobody up there at all of the family—only Mr. Mountain and the servants, like."

Smith and Styler walked down the churchyard, and under the lychgate paused and looked at each other.

"Hetherton, Florist, Gloucester Road," said Smith. "Don't forget that, Styler."

Styler nodded, as if to imply that the admonition was superfluous.

"It was close by Gloucester Road that I saw Miss Brock enter the house which Mrs. Renton afterwards entered," he said.

"Just so," assented Smith. "And it's in that quarter that we're going to make some small inquiries. Now, Styler, let's get back to town; there's nothing to be done here, as the Tresses have gone. I shall let this man drive me to the railway; you, I suppose, will stick to your machine. To-night we'll take a rest—to-morrow morning meet me at the Gloucester Road District station at ten o' clock,"

Then Smith got into the car and went off to Lynne station, reflecting upon the wreath of violets. Somebody had felt sufficient regret for John Kesteven to make him or her punctilious about sending a few flowers to lay on his lonely grave. But who? And might there not be a clue to something important through these flowers?

"And if there is," he mused, as the next train carried him off to London, "it shall go hard if Styler and I don't unearth it. One thing's certain—that violet wreath didn't come from any of the Tress folk."

Meanwhile Styler, feeling the need of refreshment, and reflecting that a square meal would help him on his way to town, was pushing his motor-bicycle back to the inn, intent upon securing food and drink. On his way he came across the Lynne police-inspector, who smiled knowingly at sight of him.

"Still on the look round?" observed he, who knew well enough that Styler and his master were what he called amateur dabblers in his own science. "Heard anything?"

"Nothing, but that Tickell's dead," replied Styler.

"Oh, we knew that early this morning," remarked the inspector. "Well, he's saved his neck, of course. He'd have been hanged, sure enough."

"You heard anything?" asked Styler.

The inspector looked his questioner up and down. His air was at first severely official; then it began to relax.

"Oh, well!" he said. "I expect we're all in the same boat—only we're in the strict way of it, so to speak, and you and your guv'nor ain't. Barrister, isn't he, your guv'nor? Ah, so I heard at the inquest. Well, I don't know that we've heard anything more than you have. But we've found a small matter that may turn out useful—one of my men found it on one of the paths leading to that clearing where Kesteven's body was lying."

"What is it?" asked Styler.

The inspector silently turned and led the way to the police-station. There, from a safe in his office, he took a small cardboard box in which lay something wrapped in cotton wool. He unwrapped this and produced a tiny bit of wrought gold, a charm, representing the head of a Hindu god, which had evidently been torn away from somebody's watch-chain by the snapping of a well-worn link.

CHAPTER XXI

THE MIDDAY SPECIAL

STYLER took the little gold charm into his left hand and turned it over gingerly with the tip of his right fore-finger.

"Foreign stuff, that, inspector," he remarked. "Delicate work, isn't it? Indian arabesque, I should say—I've seen this sort of thing before. Old, too—look how the carving, or whatever they'd call it, is worn. And this bit of a link that's hung on to it—worn as thin as tissue paper!"

"Ah, that's how it came to be broken off from a chain or something of that sort," remarked the inspector. "We've looked carefully for more links of that chain, but we haven't found anything. However, —that thing's something to go on, you know, Mr. Styler."

"Depends—depends!" replied Styler. "A good many innocent people might have dropped a little trifle like this. I suppose a lot of folk walk about those woods?"

"No they don't," said the inspector. "Old Mr. Tress, the present young man's uncle, was mighty particular about that park and grounds, and he wouldn't have anybody in 'em, because of his rare trees and shrubs, and so on, and that rule's been kept up—nobody except the Lynne Court folks go about there.

And that bit of gold, Mr. Styler, had been recently dropped—it was as fresh and bright as you see it now—it hadn't been exposed to weather."

"Exactly where did you find it?" asked Styler. "Anywhere very near where Kesteven was found?"

The inspector shuffled his hands amongst a mass of documents and drew out a roll of tracing-paper which he proceeded to spread over his desk and to fasten down with paper-weights.

"We had this map made," he said. "We thought it would come in useful some time—distances, and so on, are set out on it. You see, it's of Lynne Court—house, gardens, pleasure grounds, park, and immediate surroundings. Now there's the house. There's the spot—the clearing—in the spinney where Kesteven was found lying shot—two hundred and nineteen yards from the house. That's a path that leads from that clearing through the woods to a wicket-gate in the road to Lynchfield. Well, one of my men found this charm lying on the side of that path, just where I've marked a little cross in red ink. See?"

"I see," answered Styler. He was looking the map thoroughly over, and he noticed that the spot at which the charm had been found was only separated by the thick screens of wood at the outer boundary of the park from Mr. Samuel Pegge's bungalow on one side and from Mrs. Renton's more pretentious residence on another. "Yes, I see. You didn't notice any signs of a struggle there, I suppose?"

"Not a sign," replied the inspector. "I saw to that myself. And as soon as this thing was found I went over to Lynchfield to see if this man Tickell had any fal-lals of this sort on his watch-chain. But all the chain he had was a plain steel curb. And it didn't come off anything that Kesteven wore, neither, and nobody up at the Court recognized it—I took it up and showed it round."

Styler secretly despised this method of investigation, but he held his tongue on that point. The claims of a hungry stomach were beginning to assert themselves within him.

"Well, take care of it," he said, making for the door. "You never know what big results arise out of small things of that sort. I'll keep my eyes open, and if I ever hear anything I'll meet you as I hope you'll meet me. As you say we're all in the same boat."

Then he went to the *Lynne Arms* and ate and drank, and kept his ears open to the talk which was going on in that crowded hostelry, and heard a great many startling and original theories, and convinced himself that nothing is so pleasing to the average idler as to ventilate his notions on things which he does not understand, and eventually he journeyed leisurely back to town and went early to bed. And next morning, clothed in his most respectable garments, instead of in his motor-bicycling habiliments, he met Smith at Gloucester Road station.

"That's right, Styler," said Smith, who in his turn appeared in highly correct attire. "You did well to think of that. We've got to intrude ourselves upon

severely proper circles to-day—at least, I think so. And first of all, this florist's. We must know, if possible, who sent that wreath. Of course," he went on, as master and man walked together up Gloucester Road, "of course, you've formed some opinion on that subject?"

"Not much," answered Styler. "It hasn't quite come into my field of active operation, if I may put it that way, sir—but I suppose it will in a few minutes. If I were to hear that the wreath had been sent by Miss Brock I should know what to think. I should also know what to think if I found that it had been sent by Mrs. Renton, who certainly went to meet Miss Brock the other night. But—we shan't hear that it came from either of them, Mr. Smith."

"You think not, Styler?" exclaimed Smith. "Now, why, pray?"

"Both of 'em's a deal too fly, sir," answered Styler. "Leastways, if I'm any judge of character."

Smith ruminated over this opinion until they arrived at the florist's shop. On its threshold he also arrived at the conclusion that his clerk was probably right. Mrs. Renton was certainly a woman who was well able to hold her own; Miss Brock, just as certainly, looked the sort of young person who could not only be secret but sly.

"I dare say you're right, Styler," he remarked. "Now we shall see."

In a few minutes Styler's intuition had been proved to be correct. A courteous manageress, to whom Smith presented his card and with whom he ex-

changed a few words in private, gave the investigators all the information of which she was possessed. And as Styler had anticipated, that information amounted to little, and proved nothing. All that the manageress could tell them was that on the day but one previous, a boy in buttons (whom she was quite sure she had never seen before, and certainly could not recognize again, all boys in buttons, in her opinion, being much of a muchness) came to the shop (a large, busy, and fashionable establishment) and left a note, which she now produced to her visitors. The note enclosed another note, addressed to The Sexton, Lynne, Surrey, and was sealed. The covering note, typewritten, and bearing no name or address, simply asked that a wreath of violets, to the value of one pound (enclosed in the form of a sovereign) should be made up and dispatched to the address on the second note, which was to be placed in the box with the wreath.

"All of which was done at once—the box being sent by that afternoon's parcels post," added the manageress, obviously charmed to hear of a supposed mystery. "But as to the sender?—sorry I can't tell you more, sir. If I should ever recognize that boy——"

"As you remarked before, ma'am, all boys in buttons are very much alike," said Smith gravely. "And in these quarters of the town there are, I believe, many hundreds of 'em."

He steered Styler out of the shop, and in the direction of the District Railway.

"Quite right, Styler," he said. "Not much there. All the same, some time you might just satisfy yourself if there's a boy in buttons at that house to which the governess was driven the other night. You can easily do that without attracting attention. In the meantime we're going down to the City. You've got the copy of those marriage lines in your pocket?"

"Here," answered Styler. "You attach importance to that?"

"If Kesteven attached such sufficient importance to the certificate as to keep it stitched up in a secret pocket of the only coat he had when he came to Mr. Darrell Tress, and if somebody else also attached such importance to it as to make a point of stealing it from that secret pocket as soon as Kesteven was dead," answered Smith, "then, of course, I also consider it highly important. And for this reason, Styler—it proves that the person who has been so anxious about it as to get hold of it since Kesteven's death is an ignorant person who knows nothing about these things. She—for I'm sure it is a she (though it might be a he, acting under the suggestion of a she, you know)—probably imagines that if the marriage lines are destroyed, and the entry in the church registers defaced or destroyed or abstracted, all trace and record of the marriage is swept clear away. That, of course, is all nonsense, because there is a record of all marriages at Somerset House. But that, my dear Styler, is not known to everybody—your general public, taking it altogether, is remarkably ignorant on these little points. As I say, the person with whom we're having

to deal, is, I presume, a person who wanted to get hold of the certificate which Kesteven was hiding so carefully in order to destroy it. Or, at any rate, to take good care that it didn't come to light. Now, I'm more than ever certain that there's some extraordinary connexion between the murder of Kesteven and the marriage to which this certificate refers, and we're now going to the church whereat that marriage was celebrated to see what we can find out. And you can hail that taxi-cab; in its comparative privacy we will just take another look at the copy which you have of that certificate."

"Where is he to drive?" asked Styler, as they got into the cab. "I don't know where that church is."

"I do," remarked Smith. "And a very interesting old spot it is, too. Tell him to pull up half-way along Cornhill—we'll walk the rest. Now," he went on, as the taxicab moved off, "give me that copy, Styler, and let me refresh my memory."

Styler produced his notebook and opened it at the page on which he had made a copy of the certificate. Smith considered it at his leisure as they went City-wards and at last drew his clerk's attention to various points.

"Now, Styler," he said. "Let's go through this, item by item. This is a copy of a certificate of a marriage solemnized at St. Eanswythe's Church, in the City of London, on the 16th October 1904—that's nearly ten years ago. The contracting parties were Edward Charleston Legette, bachelor, and Maud Eleanor Rivers, spinster. They were both of full age.

His address is given as at the Hotel Metropole, Charing Cross; hers as of Broom Lodge, near Alnwick, Northumberland. Accordingly, one of these, the bridegroom, most probably, would have to acquire a legal residence in St. Eanswythe's parish, which he could easily do by renting a room for three weeks and leaving a portmanteau in it. We may have to inquire why these two people selected this particular City parish for their nuptials, Styler; I dare say there was some good reason. Meanwhile, here's the evidence that those nuptials were duly celebrated by Gervase Bright, vicar, in the presence of Anthony Denton and Sarah Giddins. Now, in my opinion, Sarah Giddins and Anthony Denton were, and may be still are—for it's within ten years since—the verger or clerk, and the church-cleaner or pew-opener. Wherefore, I take it, Mr. Legette and Miss Rivers were making a very quiet marriage, and had no friends to witness it. And what I'm chiefly hoping is that the Reverend Gervase Bright is still vicar, or still alive, and get-at-able, so that he can tell us something."

The taxi-cab pulled up amidst the turmoil and bustle of Cornhill, and Smith at once led his companion into a network of courts, alleys, and narrow passages which ran in and out amongst and lay at the foot of buildings some of which were new and some remarkably ancient. Styler, who boasted an intimate acquaintance with London, had to confess that this was new ground to him, and that he didn't know there was a church in that neighbourhood.

"There are several ancient City churches, Styler, tucked away into such out-of-the-way corners as these," said Smith. "Quaint old places they are, with Sunday congregations of about a dozen. And here we are," he continued as they turned their twentieth corner and emerged upon a little square in which a solitary plane-tree rose from a railed-in plot of turf surrounded by grey walls. "Here's St. Eanswythe, Virgin and Martyr, and there, I take it, is the vicarage. We——"

A newsboy came yelling at the top of his voice down an adjacent alley.

"Midday Special! Lynne Court Mystery! Sensational Development! Special!" Smith snatched a paper from the lad and flung him some coppers.

"I expect it's nothing but the Tickell affair," he said doubtingly. "What else——"

The next minute he thrust the paper in front of Styler's eyes. And Styler forgot all else as he stared at three lines of black capitals.

LYNNE COURT AFFAIR.

THE ABSCONDING GOVERNESS
MISS BROCK FOUND MURDERED
IN HYDE PARK.

CHAPTER XXII

CONCERNING MISS BROCK

SMITH hurriedly glanced over the two or three lines of type which lay half lost in the blankness of the stop-press space, passed the paper to Styler, and with a muttered exclamation turned away in the direction of the old church. And Styler smoothed out the paper and read:

"This morning, soon after daybreak, the body of a young woman, who had evidently been stabbed to death, was found near the Reformer's Tree, in Hyde Park, where it had presumably been lying for some hours. It has now been identified as that of Miss Brock, the governess who disappeared from Lynne Court almost immediately after the mysterious murder of the man known as John Kesteven."

Styler crumpled the newspaper into a pocket and went after his master, who at once pointed to the door of the vicarage adjoining the church.

"One thing at a time, Styler," said Smith. "We'll carry out the job that brought us to the City before we even discuss Miss Brock's death. But I will make one remark—if Miss Brock has really been murdered, then I think we shall find ourselves face to face with some strange developments, and, maybe, we shall have to start our investigations all over again. And

—who knows?—we may learn something pertinent here.”

The sending in of Smith's card resulted in an invitation to him and Styler to step into an old-fashioned, book-lined parlour where there presently came to them a cleryman, at sight of whom Smith immediately felt a sense of disappointment. For the Vicar of St. Eanswythe's was comparatively young, and suggested, somehow or other, an atmosphere of freshness, and Smith at once jumped to the conclusion that he was not the man who had celebrated the marriage ceremony into which he and Styler were professionally inquiring.

“I don't know,” said Smith, going straight to the point, “if I have the pleasure of seeing the Reverend Gervase Bright?”

The vicar smiled, shaking his head.

“Mr. Bright died two years ago,” he answered. “I am his successor.”

“I am sorry to hear that Mr. Bright is dead,” remarked Smith. “I particularly wished to see him on a professional matter. But there used to be two people connected in some way with this church who are, perhaps, alive?—a man named Anthony Denton, a woman named Sarah Giddins.”

“Clerk and church-cleaner,” replied the vicar. “They are dead, too—I buried them myself.”

Smith shook his head, and drew out Styler's copy of the marriage certificate. “That's unfortunate,” he said. “I wanted to interview some person who was actually present at the marriage ceremony referred to

in this copy of a certificate which was, as you see, issued by the late Mr. Bright. You, of course, don't know anything about it?"

The vicar, who had glanced at the copy, elevated his eyebrows and uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Oh, don't I, though!" he said, with a laugh. "It's rather odd, but I had an inquiry about that very marriage—let me see it again—yes, marriage of Edward Charleston Legette and Maud Eleanor Rivers—only the other day. Day before yesterday, to be precise."

"Had you really?" exclaimed Smith. "Now, do you know, that interests me—and my clerk, Mr. Styler—very greatly. May I ask who the person was who made that inquiry? I can assure you that I don't ask out of any idle curiosity."

The vicar, who had already noticed the eminently legal character of the address on Smith's card, responded readily.

"The inquirer was a young lady," he answered. "I think I can describe her. Rather slight, rather pretty, light-haired, grey eyes—they might be a little inclined to blue—quietly dressed, rather shy and reserved in manner. Do you happen to recognize the description?"

Smith looked at Styler. Both shook their heads. Then Styler drew out the newspaper and handed it to Smith, who held it before the vicar's astonished eyes.

"We recognize your description so well as to believe that it applies to the unfortunate young woman who is mentioned here," said Smith. "You see who

she was. Did she by any chance give her name to you, now?"

The vicar, who was greatly shocked, took the newspaper from Smith's hand and read the brief announcement of the discovery in Hyde Park for himself. He handed it back with a shake of the head.

"No!" he answered. "She gave me no name. She asked to see me—yes, it was day before yesterday, about four o' clock in the afternoon—and she produced a certificate of that marriage——"

"A certificate?" exclaimed Smith, with a glance at Styler. "You mean a proper certificate?—not a rough copy, like this?"

"I mean a certificate—such as is commonly spoken of as marriage lines—duly written out and signed by my predecessor, Mr. Bright," answered the vicar. "She wished to compare it with the entry in the register of marriages. She did so—under my personal supervision. And like you, she was evidently sorry to hear that Mr. Bright and the two witnesses to the marriage were all dead."

"Miss Brock, without a doubt," muttered Smith. "But what she can have been after—may we inspect that register?" he added, suddenly interrupting himself. "I should like to see the handwriting of the two parties chiefly concerned."

The vicar produced the register from a safe, and Smith and Styler presently bent over the entry and examined the signatures. Each had taken care to make himself familiar with some specimens of Kesteven's handwriting; each was wondering if he would

find any similarity between it and that of the man whose name had become known to them through the certificate. But the writing of the unknown Edward Charleston Legette was quite unlike that of Kesteven; that of Maud Eleanor Rivers—a delicate Italian hand—suggested nothing more than that it was the calligraphy of a woman of education.

They presently left St. Eanswythe's quiet precincts with a promise to the highly-interested vicar to give him further enlightenment in due course, and together they made their way back towards the crowds of Cornhill. But before they passed out of the quiet alleys, Smith tapped his clerk on the arm.

"Styler!" he said. "That certificate which Miss Brock produced to the parson was, without doubt, the one that Kesteven had safely hidden away in his coat. Therefore, it was Miss Brock who got into Darrell Tress's flat and took it."

"So I concluded, sir, as soon as the vicar told us of it," replied Styler. "What I'm now wondering about is—why did she want to see the register?"

"Can't think why—at present," said Smith. "But I've no doubt she'd a good reason. Now, Styler, we'll take another ride—to Kensington. Tell the man to go to the house—or near it—which you saw Miss Brock enter the other evening."

Set down at the corner of a quiet street obscured in a network of similar thoroughfares lying between Victoria Road and Kensington Square, Styler promptly led his companion to a house which was plainly of the board-and-apartments order. And as they walked up

the little garden which fenced it off from the pavement, the door opened, and Darrell Tress and Hextall appeared in company with an obviously distressed and concerned landlady, who was talking with great volubility. At the sight of the two new-comers, she showed signs of irritation and made as if to retreat into her house, but a word from Hextall stopped her.

"That's all right," he said, reassuringly. "These gentlemen are in charge of this case on Mr. Tress's behalf. And as we can tell them all that you've told us, they won't trouble you."

"And very glad I shall be!" exclaimed the woman. "I've never had any peace since seven o'clock this morning, what with police, and detectives, and newspaper gentlemen. Of course, as this gentleman was the poor young woman's employer, I don't mind telling him anything, but you know all I know now, and——"

"Just so," interrupted Hextall, motioning the two fresh arrivals to withdraw. "We won't trouble you further just now. Come away, Smith," he went on, taking the barrister's arm and leading him down the path. "We've got to know all there is to know there, and I can inform you. That woman's half crazy over the business—there were three men here when we came."

"And no doubt somebody—if the men were detectives—has examined whatever Miss Brock left there?" said Smith.

"They have—the police have, at any rate," answered Hextall. "And they found nothing. And this landlady knows next to nothing, either. Still, she knows something. This much," he continued, as all four left the garden and formed a group outside the gate. "Miss Brock arrived here at this house the other afternoon—the afternoon of the day on which she disappeared from Lynne Court. She had once stayed here for a month, two years ago, so she was known. She told the landlady that she wanted rooms again, and she took the drawing-room floor—two rooms. She had no luggage with her—she said it would come on later, but it hasn't arrived. She didn't go out until next day—then she went out about the middle of the afternoon. She returned about eight in the evening and soon after she got in she was visited by a lady who was certainly Mrs. Renton. We, of course, know that—Styler there saw Mrs. Renton arrive."

"At eight-twenty-five, precisely remarked Styler. "Miss Brock went in at eight-fifteen."

"Mrs. Renton remained with Miss Brock for some time," continued Hextall. "Of course, the landlady can't tell anything about that, because there was nothing in the visit to excite any suspicion. But she herself admitted Mrs. Renton and she saw her again as she was leaving, so there'll be no difficulty about proving that Mrs. Renton did come here—whatever she came for."

"She won't deny that she came," said Smith. "Go on!"

"All yesterday Miss Brock remained indoors," proceeded Hextall. "About seven in the evening she received a telegram. An hour later she went out. The landlady's servant, who had been out on an errand, saw Miss Brock just after she left the house. She was in the company of a man—a tall, elderly-looking man, according to the servant's recollections. She saw them talking at the corner of the street—there. A taxi-cab came along; the man hailed it; they both got in and were driven off. And Miss Brock never returned, and the landlady heard nothing more of her until the police came this morning to say that her dead body had been found in Hyde Park."

"How did whoever found her know who she was?" asked Smith.

"They found the telegram on her," replied Hextall. "I've seen it—Tress and I went to the police as soon as we heard of this. The telegram gives little clue. It said simply 'Outside your lodgings—to-night—right,' and it wasn't signed."

"Did you notice where it was dispatched from?" asked Smith.

"Yes. Regent Street—at a quarter to seven," replied Hextall.

"The police have that wire, of course," said Smith.

"Oh, of course—they have everything. And, by the way," added Hextall, "they found something on her, too, which I'm sure you'll think of importance—a quantity of French bank-notes."

"Ah!" exclaimed Smith. "That's significant, indeed!"

"She'd a good deal of money on her. But beyond that telegram, no papers," continued Hextall. "Whatever the object of the murderer was, however, it certainly wasn't robbery. All her money and valuables were untouched. And yet—they said that there were signs which showed that her pockets and clothing had been searched."

"Aye, to be sure!" said Smith, with a glance at Styler. "I'm sure they would be. Well, it's no use standing here. There's nothing more you learnt from the landlady?"

"Nothing," answered Hextall. "But what are you going to do?"

Before Smith could reply to this question a taxi-cab came swiftly round the corner, and Fowler's face was suddenly seen at its window. Seeing his master, he stopped the cab and springing out hastened to Darrell with an expression of grave concern.

"Can you and Dr. Hextall come home, sir?" he said anxiously. "You're needed."

CHAPTER XXIII

SMITH REPORTS PROGRESS

DARRELL TRESS started out of the gloomy silence which he had maintained while Hextall and Smith talked, and he glanced at his valet with suspicion.

"What is it now, Fowler?" he demanded. "Something else gone wrong? I'm about sick of this! What's appened?"

Fowler gave the other members of the group a comprehensive glance.

"It's Walters, sir," he answered.

Darrell started again—violently, this time. He turned to Hextall and his face paled.

"Walters!" he exclaimed. "What——"

He stopped abruptly, still staring at Hextall. And Hextall spoke quickly to the valet.

"What is it, Fowler?" he asked. "What about Walters?"

"I think he's gone out of his mind, sir," replied Fowler. "Seems like it, anyway. After you and Mr. Tress had gone out this morning, we heard about Miss Brock, sir—a boy came round selling newspapers, and I got one. And a bit after that I found Walters sitting in the hall, crying and moaning. Then he began to say all sorts of queer things; mixing a lot of things up. I made out that he was in love with Miss Brock, and it seemed to me that the sudden news of

her death had thrown him clean off his balance. He talked a lot—wildly, you understand, sir—about murder, and revolvers, and I don't know what, and at last he said something about telling the police all he knew, and suddenly, before I could stop him, he clapped on his hat and set off out of the flat, saying something about keeping things to himself no longer and going to Scotland Yard. And so I thought I'd better come after you, sir—I knew where you'd gone."

Hextall motioned Darrell to get into the waiting taxi-cab. He turned and spoke to Smith.

"Follow on to the flat with Styler and Fowler—at once!" he said, in a low voice. "You may be useful. I'll go straight there with Tress—I want to speak to him."

As the first cab drove off Darrell sank back into the corner with a groan of despair.

"It's all up, Hextall!" he exclaimed. "That ass will have gone to the detectives, and told them all about Paquita and the sleep-walking affair. And now they'll come and arrest her!"

"Not on that evidence, I think," said Hextall. "They'd want something more than that, I fancy, before they'd go to that length."

Nevertheless, though he put as much assurance into his voice as he could, he was by no means easy about this sudden and unexpected turn in affairs. He, of course, had never anticipated that such a turn could take place. But now he saw how very naturally it had happened. Walters, cherishing a secret passion for the governess, had doubtless been thrown off his men-

tal balance by the news of her tragic death, and had at once plunged into a mass of morbid imaginings concerning the mystery, out of which one impression would certainly stand clear—that he had actually seen Paquita with a revolver in her hand on the night of the murder of Kesteven. And that impression would lead to further imaginings—he had probably seen some deep-laid scheme of murder in which Kesteven was but one victim and Miss Brock another, and his promises of secrecy and silence had been at once forgotten, and he had rushed off to the police to blurt out all he knew.

“An awkward situation,” he continued, after a brief silence; “but I don’t think the police would arrest your sister on what Walters can tell about that night. All the same, I’m afraid we must be prepared to meet some inquiry from them.”

Darrell growled resentfully. He began to mutter complaints about interference: he had left Lynne Court because of the publicity drawn upon it by the Kesteven affair, and now more publicity was going to come upon him in London. He ought, he said, to have followed his first instinct, and taken his sister and brother away to the continent.

“I’m afraid you couldn’t have done that,” said Hex-tall. “You’ll be wanted as a witness more than once yet, you know. And, of course, we never foresaw that things would turn out in this way, nor imagined that Walters was in love with the governess. After all, he may not have gone to the police.”

But an hour later, as they were discussing matters with Smith and Styler in Darrell's room at the flat in Queen Anne Street, Fowler announced two visitors, who, on being shown in, proved to be from New Scotland Yard. Walters had gone straight to the police headquarters on leaving the flat, and had poured out all his story. And now the authorities wanted to know. With the usual official caution they wanted to know by degrees. They wanted to know if Walters was in his right mind; if he had any justification for his statement; if there was anything further to be learnt of the incident which he had reported.

"He tells us that he has already reported what he saw to you, Mr. Tress, and also to you, Dr. Hextall," said the elder of the two visitors. "So you're as conversant with the details as we are. You must admit that there's evidence there which might connect Miss Tress with Kesteven's death? She was around there with a revolver——"

"I never yet heard of a somnambulist shooting a wide-awake person!" interrupted Smith, cynically. "I should say such a thing was never known to medical science! The thing's absurd on the face of it. It would argue that——"

The detective smiled even more cynically than Smith.

"A moment!" he said, lifting a finger. "We don't know that Miss Tress was in a state of somnambulism. This man Walters didn't tell us that Miss Tress was walking in her sleep. All that Walters tells amounts to this—'On such and such a night, at such and such

a time, I saw Miss Tress come from the direction of the spinney in which Kesteven's dead body was afterwards found, and she had a revolver in her hand!" Do you see? Now, if a man is found in a particular place, shot dead, and it is proved that a certain person was near that place and in possession of a revolver at a time approximating to the time of death—what then? For anything we know to the contrary, Miss Tress may have had her own reasons for shooting this man Kesteven. And we do not know that she is given to somnambulism."

Hextall, who had exchanged a whisper with Smith, drew the visitors' attention to himself.

"I think—having consulted with Mr. Tress and with our friend Mr. Smith—that I had better tell you all I know," he said. "Mr. Tress is naturally very anxious about his sister's safety, and he is desirous that we should not seem to make any mystery or show any attempt at concealment. So I may as well inform you that I am aware, from experience, of Miss Tress's tendency to somnambulism, and that I am absolutely certain that she was walking in her sleep when Walters saw her."

He went on to detail his own experiences with regard to what he had seen on the last night of his stay at Lynne Court; in his desire to tell the whole truth, he told of the discovery of the revolver and its one discharged cartridge. The detectives listened in silence and made no sign, and as they gave no immediate answer when Hextall had finished his statement, Darrell grew impatient.

"Look here!" he said suddenly. "I want to know where I am! We've told you all we know—at least, Dr. Hextall's told you; and we can't tell more because we don't know more. What I want to know is—are you going to arrest my sister?"

The elder detective smiled.

"Not at present, at any rate, Mr. Tress," he answered. "I told you we came to make inquiries, and we've made them. All we have to do now is to make our report. If we want your sister at any time—for further inquiries, you know," he added, with a look at Smith—"well, I suppose we shall find her here, or at Lynne Court."

"She's not going to run away, anyhow," said Darrell doggedly. "But if you'll take my advice, you'll turn your attention to finding out who really did kill Kesteven, and who's killed Miss Brock, too, instead of running after false scents. I'm not a clever chap, but I'll lay a thousand pounds to sixpence that whoever killed Kesteven killed Miss Brock, too! And if you've got that fool Walters at your headquarters you can tell him that he'd better not turn up here again—I won't have him back."

The detectives smiled and went away, and when they were clear of the room Smith motioned the others to resume their seats at the table round which they had been discussing the situation previous to the official visit.

"Now, look here!" he said. "We'd better face matters. I'm afraid—I'm very much afraid!—that this will result in Miss Tress's arrest. You know what

these chaps are, Hextall?—give them a plausible idea and they'll stick to it like grim death. And we're face to face with the very grim and pertinent fact that Tickell is dead."

"Why is that so very pertinent—and grim?" demanded Darrell.

"Because the police had made up their minds that Tickell was the culprit," answered Smith, with decision. "They'd have hanged Tickell if he'd lived—as sure as fate! But Tickell has escaped them—now they'll turn to the line of least resistance. Walters has set them off—and there's no denying that there's a *prima facie* case against your sister, Tress. As one of those two men said—they don't know what reasons Miss Tress may have had for wishing to kill this man. Also, they don't know that she really was walking in her sleep when Walters saw her. They know that you, Hextall, and you, Tress, found a revolver in her bedroom, one chamber of which had been recently discharged. Oh, yes, there's a *prima facie* case! I tell—I remind you—of all this because it's no use shirking or burking matters; we've got to face stern facts. Now, just let me sum matters up to you—give me your particular attention, all of you, and see if you don't arrive at the conclusion at which I've already arrived. I'll take things point by point.

"First. There appears to be no reasonable doubt that on the night on which you, Tress, returned to Lynne Court with Kesteven and Tickell, Kesteven and Tickell held some conference, the result of which was that Tickell, with a large sum of money in his posses-

sion, set off for Weymouth, intending to hand that sum of money over to Captain Polbeck in furtherance of a scheme devised for the escape of an unknown man—whom we will call X—from the French penal colony in Guiana.

“Second. I have no doubt whatever that Kesteven and Miss Brock were in possession of some secret relating to the marriage celebrated at St. Eanswythe’s Church in the City, between two people who then called themselves Edward Charleston Legette and Maud Eleanor Rivers. Miss Brock, without a doubt, knew that Kesteven possessed the certificate of that marriage, that it was concealed in a suit of clothes which was left in this flat; without a doubt she left Lynne Court after his death in order to come to this flat and abstract it.

“Third. I say that I personally have no doubts about these two points. Now I come to more debatable ground. I ask myself two questions. One is: Is the matter of the convict Englishman in French Guiana—whom we call X—mixed up with the matter of the marriage certificate which Kesteven guarded so jealously, and Miss Brock was so anxious to secure after his death? The other is: Were Kesteven and Miss Brock both murdered by a person or persons who desired to silence them because of their knowledge of these matters? Very well—personally, I don’t find much difficulty in answering these questions. I answer them both—both, mind!—in the affirmative. In my opinion the whole secret of the mystery about these murders could be laid bare if we had with us

the man, whoever he may be, who is now confined in the French Guiana convict prisons! He, probably, knows—*knows!* And——”

A discreet tap at the door heralded the entrance of Fowler, who came quietly in and closed it behind him.

“Mrs Renton has called, sir,” he said, advancing to Darrell. “She wishes me to say that she is very anxious indeed to see you and Dr. Hextall and Mr. Smith—at once.”

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. RENTON'S STORY

BEFORE Darrell had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment to give Fowler an answer, Smith, who was sitting next to him, touched him lightly on the arm.

"Allow me, Tress," he said. "Where," he went on, turning to the valet, "where is Mrs. Renton?"

"Drawing-room, sir," replied Fowler promptly.

"Ask her to wait a moment until Mr. Tress is disengaged," said Smith. He turned to his companions, when Fowler had left the room, and shook his head at them warningly. "A word of caution to all of you!" he continued. "Mrs. Renton, of course, will come in here—be careful what you say, any one of you. In fact—say nothing. Let me hear what she says. Because, remember, that, as far as we know, Mrs. Renton is not aware that Styler saw her drive up to the house in Kensington at which Miss Brock was staying. We have not told that to anybody, you know—neither to the police nor the newspapers. All the same, I'll lay anything she's come here to see us about that very matter. Now, Tress, have her in—and remember what I've said. Let her talk—we'll listen."

Mrs. Renton, presently ushered in by Fowler, looked eagerly at the four men who stood up at her

entrance. And at sight of Styler, she hesitated and half drew back.

"My clerk and assistant, Mrs. Renton," said Smith hastily, waving a hand at Styler. "A perfectly safe and confidential young man, ma'am—you need have no fear of speaking before him."

Mrs. Renton bowed and took the chair which Hextall placed for her at the end of the oblong table at which the men had been sitting. She threw back her veil and revealed a somewhat excited and perturbed face.

"I came here," she said, "because I had an idea that I might find Dr. Hextall and Mr. Smith with you, Mr. Tress, and, and—in short, I'm awfully bothered, and I want some advice. About this—this dreadful affair of Miss Brock, you know. Of course, you've seen the latest newspaper?"

"No—at least, I'm sure we've not seen anything that you're referring to," replied Smith, taking upon himself the spokesmanship of the party. "The last we saw, I think, was the midday special. Nothing much in that, you know."

"Oh, but here's something very much later!" exclaimed Mrs. Renton, producing a folded newspaper from her bag. "I bought that an hour ago—it was reading what it says there that brought me to you—I really am concerned, because I don't want bringing into this horrible affair, and I really don't know why I should be."

She passed the newspaper over to Smith who promptly read the passage to which she pointed.

THE HYDE PARK MURDER.

"Latest inquiries into the death of Miss Brock, the Lynne Court governess, show that the victim had taken rooms at Laburnum Terrace, a quiet street off Kensington Square, two days ago. She had had one visitor there whom the landlady, Mrs. Hodgson, is able to describe fully. A more pertinent revelation in connexion with the mystery is that on the evening preceding the murder—yesterday evening, in fact—Mrs. Hodgson's servant saw Miss Brock enter a taxi-cab at the corner of Laburnum Terrace, in company with a tall man whom she recollects as being tall, elderly, and of military appearance. The police are hard at work endeavouring to trace the lady caller, the driver of the taxi-cab, and the man who was in Miss Brock's company."

Smith laid the newspaper down and looked at Mrs. Renton.

"Yes?" he said.

"Well," answered Mrs. Renton, "I am the caller referred to in that paragraph. It was I who called at Miss Brock's lodgings. I was there—oh, perhaps half an hour. And I wanted to ask you—do you think the police will bother me? Do you think they'll find out? Do you think I shall have to give evidence, and all that sort of thing? And do you think it would perhaps be best, wisest, if I went straight to the police and told them all I know?"

"That," replied Smith, quietly kicking Styler under the table, "that wholly depends on what you do know."

"I know next to nothing!" said Mrs. Renton. "And I'm utterly confused about what I do know. Everything was so—so very strange."

"What was it that was strange?" asked Smith.

"Oh, everything! Miss Brock—her conduct—her—oh, it was all strange!" replied Mrs. Renton. "I didn't and don't understand it at all. Perhaps I'd better explain. You see, I arranged to come to town for a few days. Whenever I come to town I always stay at Claridge's, and the day before I come I send a line to the papers—the *Times*, *Morning Post*, *Telegraph*, you know—saying that I am staying at Claridge's for so long. That lets my friends know I'm in town, and saves me a lot of trouble. Of course, I sent the usual notice to the papers when I came up the other day. And I suppose that's how Miss Brock got to know that I was at Claridge's, you know. Anyhow, during the first afternoon I was there I got a note from her, asking me to go and see her that evening."

"You haven't got that note, of course, Mrs. Renton?" inquired Smith.

Mrs. Renton immediately unclasped her bag.

"Oh, but of course I have!" she answered. "Here it is."

She threw a much-crumpled sheet of cheap note-paper on the table, and Smith picked it up and drew the attention of the other three men to it. It was dated from Laburnum Terrace and bore traces of having been hurriedly written.

"DEAR MRS. RENTON,—I learn from the paper that you are staying at Claridge's Hotel. I should be so

grateful to you if you would come and see me at the above address this evening about half-past eight o'clock. I am sorry to trouble you, but I am sure you will come when I tell you that I am in very great trouble.

"Yours sincerely,
"SOPHIA BROCK."

"That's Miss Brock's writing, I suppose, Tress?" asked Smith. "You know it?"

"Oh, that's her writing all right," asserted Darrell. "Bit scrawly, but it's hers."

Smith handed the note back.

"So you went there, Mrs. Renton?" he remarked.

"As I had no engagements for that evening, I did go," replied Mrs. Renton. "I certainly thought it a strange request, and I couldn't think why it was particularly made to me, nor why Miss Brock couldn't come to my hotel. But I'm not without a certain amount of curiosity, and as I thought that Miss Brock had run away from your house, Mr. Tress, because of that Kesteven affair, I—well, I went. I dined early on purpose, and I drove to this place immediately after dinner. And when I got there and saw Miss Brock, I was more mystified than ever!"

"Now, why, exactly?" asked Smith, who was following every word with great attention. "What particularly excited your astonishment?"

"Because of Miss Brock's manner, and what she said—or didn't say—and her behaviour—and everything," replied Mrs. Renton. "She seemed as if she

didn't quite know what she was doing. She didn't, or couldn't, tell me what the trouble was to which she referred in this letter; she talked disjointedly; she was perpetually going to the window and looking out on the street——"

"As if she expected somebody, eh?" interrupted Smith.

"I don't know whether she expected anybody or not," said Mrs. Renton. "I only know what she did, and that she was restless and uneasy. And in the middle of it all a telegram came to her, and——"

"Ah!" exclaimed Smith. He glanced knowingly at Hextall. "Yes," he went on, turning again to Mrs. Renton. "A telegram, eh? And what then? She read it, of course, in your presence."

"She read it in my presence and she burned it in my presence," answered Mrs. Renton. "There was a bed-room candle standing on a sideboard in her sitting-room, and she lighted it and burned the telegram before me as soon as she'd read it. And then she said—I give you her words as near as I can remember them—'Oh, Mrs. Renton, I can't talk or tell you anything to-night—will you please go away, and let me come and see you in a day or two?' And I saw that she was so upset about something that I went—there and then."

"And—that's all?" asked Smith, with a keen glance at the narrator.

"All!" replied Mrs. Renton, with decisive promptitude. "I left without hearing why she wanted me, or what was the matter, or—or anything. And I neither

saw her, nor heard of her, until I bought a newspaper about noon to-day and learnt that her body had been found. And now, really, Mr. Smith, what would you advise me to do?"

Smith appeared to consider this question; the others silently and idly watched him—with the exception of Styler, who quietly scribbled a line on a scrap of paper and unobtrusively pushed it along the table under his master's notice.

"Well, that question requires some thinking over, Mrs. Renton," said Smith at last. "And before I answer it, I'd like to ask you a question or two. Did you know Miss Brock at all well?"

"I!" exclaimed Mrs. Renton in evident surprise. "Dear me, no! How should I know her? I met her at Mr. Tress's house—now and then. Once or twice I met her on the roads near Lynne Court, or in the village at Lynne, when she had Mr. Tress's little brother with her. No, I didn't know the poor thing at all—beyond that."

"So that there was no reason, that you can think of, why she should appeal to you?" suggested Smith.

"None! That made me so surprised. And," added Mrs. Renton, thoughtfully, "all the more astonished when, having appealed to me, and I having responded, she seem to have nothing to tell me on my going to her. In fact I was thoroughly mystified, amazed, by the whole affair."

"Just so," said Smith. "Now, have you told all this to any one beyond ourselves? Mentioned it to anybody, eh? —anybody at all?"

"Yes, I have," replied Mrs. Renton. "I mentioned it to my brother, Major Esmondhaugh, when I was lunching with him next day. You know him—at least, you've seen him with me at Lynne station. Don't you remember—I drove him to the station one day when you were going up to town by the same train, Mr. Smith?"

"I remember very well—a tall, elderly man," answered Smith, reflectively. "Oh, yes! And what did Major Esmondhaugh say?"

"Nothing, except that it was all very queer," answered Mrs. Renton. "And so it all is. And—what shall I do?"

"Well," replied Smith, looking round at the other men, "I think that your best plan is to go and tell the authorities at New Scotland Yard exactly what you have told us. And—I should go at once. By doing that, you'll save yourself all the annoyance of being sought for, advertised for, spied upon—and all the rest of it."

Mrs. Renton nodded with a sigh of relief and promptly rose.

"I'm sure you're right," she said. "And I'll go just now. Perhaps your man will get me a cab, Mr. Tress?—I'll drive straight there."

Smith went down to the taxi-cab which Fowler presently summoned and saw Mrs. Renton off. When he came back and rejoined the others his face was set with some hidden purpose.

"Now, Tress," he said. "Just let us put out of our minds the little episode that's just happened and re-

turn to what we were discussing. I've made up my mind as to a certain course of action, and I want to enter on it this minute. I've told you that, in my opinion, your sister is in danger. Now, will you authorize me to lay out three thousand pounds if necessary—at once?"

"Thirty thousand, if you like," answered Darrell promptly. "Write you a cheque for it just now, if you like."

"You can post me a cheque for three thousand to my chambers to-night," said Smith. "During the next twenty-four hours I shall be away—so will Styler. We'll see you to-morrow night. In the meantime, don't leave Miss Tress. Now, Styler, come!"

Outside the flat Smith took his clerk by the arm.

"Styler," he said, "you'll go down to Lynne at once and you'll stop the night at the *Lynne Arms*. Find out by hook or by crook if Mrs. Renton had guests on the night of the Kesteven murder, and who they were. Meet me at my chambers at seven to-morrow evening. As for me, I am going off by the next train to Weymouth—to find Polbeck."

CHAPTER XXV

THE CONVENIENT CABLE

BEFORE the close of that evening Smith was once more in Weymouth, safely bestowed again in the same hotel in which he and Styler had interviewed Captain Polbeck only two days previously. By nine o'clock next morning he had breakfasted; before ten he was down amongst the quays and the shipping, prospecting for Polbeck and his schooner. And by a quarter past ten he had found the little seaman, and was safely stowed away with him in a cabin in which there was just room to turn round.

Polbeck was shrewdly inquisitive. He knew as soon as he set eyes on Smith's round face that this seemingly innocent, gold-spectacled gentleman from London was wanting him, and was after further information. Visions of more profitable transactions arose before his sharp eyes. And Smith left him in little doubt; he went straight to his subject as soon as Polbeck had conducted him into the cabin and closed the door on them.

"I came down from London late last night on purpose of seeing you again, captain," said Smith. "I should have gone out to Portland to find you as soon as I arrived, if it hadn't been so late. Besides, I remembered that you don't sail until the twenty-first, so I felt sure of finding you here this morning. Now I

want some more information from you, and you shall be well paid for anything you can tell me."

"Glad to tell you anything I can, sir," answered Polbeck. "But," he added, with a half-dismal shake of the head, "I reckon there ain't much, if anything, that I didn't tell you before."

"Perhaps other matters have suggested themselves to me," said Smith. "I dare say you can be useful. Now, you don't know the name of the Englishman whose escape from the French convict establishment in Guiana you were to assist in?"

"I don't," replied Polbeck. "Never heard it!"

"You never heard him referred to by, say, a nickname?"

"No! He was never referred to except as the Englishman."

"And you don't know the name of the man with whom you had those negotiations?"

"I don't. But," exclaimed Polbeck, with a sudden flash of recollection, "I know him by a nickname, sure enough!"

"Ah, that's good," responded Smith, with a sigh of relief. "What nickname, now?"

"Cuba Sam," answered Polbeck promptly. "Him being a chap as was always talking about his doings in Cuba—which is a place that, in my opinion, he'd made a trifle too hot to hold him."

"Did everybody know him by that name?" asked Smith.

"Never heard him mentioned or by no other," replied Polbeck. "Oh, yes, he's well enough known in

Georgetown by that name—leastways, he's well known at that bar where I used to meet him."

"Very good. Now what's the name of that bar?" asked Smith. "Bar, tavern, public-house, or whatever it is?"

"Aykin's Bar—that's how it's called. On Gun-fire Wharf—that's where it is. A favourite house of call for English and Yankee skippers. Bar they call it, but it's a sort of hotel, where you can put up if you want to," said Polbeck. "Many's the time I've stopped there myself."

"Good again, captain—we're getting on very well," remarked Smith. "You're able to tell me something valuable, after all. Now then, here's the most serious question of the lot: Do you know any man—any business man—in Georgetown whom you can thoroughly rely upon?"

"I do, sir," answered Polbeck with assurance. "The agent I deal with there is as straight a man as you'd meet in a twelvemonth. Daniel Brine, general agent. Known him nigh on to twenty year."

"Is he the sort of man who would do some confidential business for you if you cabled to him?" asked Smith.

"He would, sir," replied Polbeck. "No man better. I've had occasion to cable Daniel Brine before to-day—on small matters, of course. But if you've never cabled to them parts before, sir, I'll warn you that it's an expensive business—five-and six a word, unless you send it at the deferred rates, and even then it's half that."

"I'm afraid we can't help the cost," observed Smith. "It's got to be incurred. Now if you've got anything to do about your ship, captain, leave me to draft out this cable, and when I've settled it to my satisfaction, we'll go to the post-office together. Can you give me writing materials?"

Polbeck produced an old-fashioned desk and a quantity of foolscap, and saying that he would see to his lading, went on deck and left Smith to his labours. They were not so easy as he had fancied they might be; it was difficult to convey to a man three thousand four hundred miles away the exact meaning of what he wanted. And the situation was in itself delicate. Smith knew well enough that he must do nothing to assist, or even seem to desire to assist in the escape of a man who had been convicted and sentenced to a term of penal servitude by a friendly government; if it were found out that such a matter was being compassed there would be sad complications with our own Foreign Office and the French authorities. What he wanted was not to assist the mysterious Englishman now held at Cayenne to escape, but to ascertain definitely who he was. This Cuba Sam might know that much: he might not. But under the present grave circumstances, it was certainly worth while spending some of Darrell Tress's money in order to find out what Cuba Sam did know.

Eventually Smith produced the following message, which he read over half a dozen times before summoning Polbeck to hear it:

"Polbeck, Weymouth, to Brine, Georgetown, Demerara. Please find Cuba Sam at Aykin's Bar. Tell him Polbeck says matter of Englishman now in other hands fully disposed to take it up but requiring proof Cuba Sam's bona fides before proceeding. He must at once cable Englishman's name and date of his leaving France to Smith, 68c, Pump Court, London. On his doing this pay him one hundred pounds now cabled by me to your order at British Guiana Bank, Georgetown, and tell him to be ready for further instructions."

"However cautious a gentleman Cuba Sam may be, that ought to fetch him if he's still in the land of the living," mused Smith, as he went towards the companion to call Polbeck. "There's nothing in that to make him suspicious, and there's everything to raise his hopes. Come down, captain, and look at this," he went on, as he caught sight of Polbeck's sturdy figure on deck. "How will that do?" he asked, when he had laid the sheet of foolscap before the seaman. "You see what I'm after—I want to know what name that Englishman goes by. Will that fetch Cuba Sam? Is he the sort of chap who'll jump at a hundred pounds in cash?"

Polbeck slowly read over the cablegram, and re-read it, and fell to scratching his head.

"Well," he said, "he weren't exactly what you'd call a hard-up chap, Cuba Sam. He'd always money for what he wanted. All the same, a hundred pound for the mere trouble of telling a man's name is good pay. But," he continued with a sly laugh, "I know

what'll fetch Cuba Sam quick enough. All you want to do, mister, to improve that there message, is to add two words to it."

"What words?" asked Smith.

"‘And remittances,’" replied Polbeck with a shrewd wink. "‘And remittances.’ Make them last words read, ‘Be ready for further instructions and remittances.’ See? Then he'll think the thing's going through quicker nor what he'd thought it was. Add 'em, guv'nor—add them two words!"

"Good notion!" said Smith, and scribbled the words in. "And now, captain, you can come with me to the bank and the post-office, and we'll get this little job through. Now let's see—it's now half-past ten English time. What time will it be in those far-away regions?"

"Georgetown, sir, is situate, roughly speaking, fifty-eight degrees west of Greenwich," answered Polbeck, with an air of wisdom. "Accordingly, it will at this moment be about twenty minutes to seven in the morning there."

"Then we may reckon that your agent, Daniel Brine, will get this cable by the time he starts business," said Smith. "Then I suppose he'll have to look for Cuba Sam."

"Cuba Sam's practice was to drop in at Aykin's Bar about eleven o'clock of a forenoon," remarked Polbeck, "and as it was Brine's to drop in a bit later, I reckon they'll meet there just when it's about three o'clock this afternoon with us."

"In that case, if Cuba Sam is in Georgetown, I expect to have a cablegram in London by six this evening," said Smith. "Come along, and we'll get these things off."

Thanks to his previous transaction with one of the Weymouth banks, Smith had no difficulty in procuring cash funds, nor in cabling one hundred pounds to the order of Daniel Brine at the British Guiana Bank in Georgetown. Nor did it take long to dispatch the cable from the post-office, nor to present Captain Polbeck with a bank-note, the receipt of which seemed to give him much pleasure.

"Anything as I can do further, sir," he said, "I shall be pleased to do. Only give it a name, and here's the man!"

"Then you can give me the pleasure of your company at lunch, captain," replied Smith, steering a course for his hotel. "Our business is now done, and for an hour we can enjoy ourselves. After that I must catch an express for London."

Busied with Polbeck and the Georgetown cable all the morning, Smith had had no time to attend to the Brock affair. He had glanced at a morning newspaper as he breakfasted, and had gathered that no new developments had arisen; the police, at any rate, had not supplied the press with any fresh information. Smith was accordingly left in ignorance on the matter of Mrs. Renton's promised visit to New Scotland Yard. There was nothing new, either, in a paper which he purchased as his train left Weymouth early in the afternoon. But when he reached Reading he en-

countered the earlier editions of the London evening papers, and a staring headline showed him that the police were being active—or, at any rate, were having activity thrust upon them.

The headline spoke of important developments. But Smith laughed gently and satirically when he read the first paragraph. Mrs. Renton had evidently been to headquarters and had told the authorities precisely what she had told the gathering in Darrell Tress's study. And it was abundantly evident from the inspired communication to the press that the authorities regarded this as a thoroughly satisfactory explanation of Mrs. Renton's visit to Miss Brock's lodgings.

"It is quite evident," the report went on, "that the unfortunate young woman was in a highly nervous and anxious state when Mrs. Renton visited her, and the testimony of the landlady, Mrs. Hodgson, seems to indicate that she was equally nervous and uneasy during the next day. Mrs. Hodgson states that Miss Brock scarcely touched the meals served to her, was seen and heard to pace her room a great deal, and was obviously anxious and abstracted. She appeared to be extremely nervous when the telegram already referred to was handed to her, and the servant who saw her enter the taxi-cab in company with the unknown man says that she was talking to her companion in a very excited manner. Fortunately, the driver of the taxi-cab has come forward. At a late hour last night he presented himself at New Scotland Yard and told his story to the authorities. He remembered being hailed by the two people in question at the corner of

Laburnum Terrace, and at the bidding of the man he drove to the Park Lane corner of Upper Grosvenor Street, along which his fares proceeded on his setting them down. The police are making inquiries on the lines suggested by this information."

Smith laughed again as he threw the paper aside. And after that he gave himself up to thinking matters over on his own lines of reasoning, and he was still thinking when at seven o'clock he reached Pump Court, opened the door of his chambers, and was confronted by the always punctual Styler.

CHAPTER XXVI

STYLER LEARNS THINGS

WHILE Smith journeyed down to Weymouth, Styler, less pressed for time, went leisurely home to his lodgings, made ready his faithful motor-cycle, and in due course set out on a pleasant evening ride across Surrey. There was no particular reason why he should arrive at Lynne before dark, and he accordingly made his way southward at a moderate speed. This plentitude of time also induced Styler, when he was half-way to his destination, to pull up at an inviting way-side hostelry in the neighbourhood of Dorking, and to possess himself of a foaming pot of bitter ale; a love of the truly rural and of fresh air made him carry that pot outside the tavern to a bench which stood beneath its diamond-paned windows and swinging signpost. And sitting there in the fading twilight, conversing amicably with a carter whose horses were drinking at the trough, Styler became aware of a smart automobile which came from the direction of London and went southward. It flashed past the wayside inn at top speed, and was gone in a second. But Styler had remarkably sharp eyes, and in one of the two occupants of that well-appointed car he recognized Mrs. Renton. He was glad to see, however, that Mrs. Renton did not recognize in him the fourth member of the group which she had en-

countered at Darrell Tress's flat earlier that very afternoon. Mrs. Renton did not, in fact, even glance at the wayside inn, nor at the ale consumer who lounged on its bench; she was busily engaged as she whirled past in talking to a companion. And Styler observed that the companion was a tall, elderly gentleman of an appearance which suggested a present or past connexion with the army.

Styler made no haste over his pot of ale, but he accelerated his speed when he once more mounted his motor-cycle. It was just approaching dusk when he rode into the stable-yard of the *Lynne Arms*, deposited his machine in the coach-house, and went into the bar to arrange about his room for the night. He lingered there for a few minutes, chatting with the landlord; then, hinting that he had a little business in the village, he went out into the gloom. The landlord believed that Styler was bound for the police-station; but Styler, though he certainly proceeded in that direction, soon turned on his tracks and sought another. If any one had been able to dog his footsteps they would have found that they led, by various twistings and turnings, to the neighbourhood of Mrs. Renton's residence, The Warren.

Like a good many other folk who have set out on this particular sort of quest, Styler had no very clear notion of what he was going to do. But he was a profound believer in chance; something, he felt sure, would turn up which would be of use and advantage to him. To begin with, he introduced himself, worm-fashion, into Mrs. Renton's quiet grounds, and from

the convenient ambuscade of a shrubbery, took a look at the house. There were lighted windows above and below, but as all the blinds were closely drawn, Styler quickly perceived that he was not going to have much opportunity of getting a peep into the interior. This was disappointing, because he wished to see Mrs. Renton's companion at close quarters. And then, while he was casting about in his mind as to what he should do next, the hall-door opened, and in the flood of light which streamed out from the hall he saw Mrs. Renton and the man who had ridden with her in the motor-car emerge and walk quickly away down a side path. In another minute Styler heard the click of a garden gate; then footsteps on the hard road without. And in the second minute he had slipped off his shoes, had slipped out of the shrubbery, and was following those footsteps at a safe distance.

The two people in front went up hill; up the lane towards the woods which shut in the park and grounds of Lynne Court. Styler fancied that Mrs. Renton and her companion might be going there; wherever they were going, he, too, was bound. But before he had time to speculate further on this matter his quarry turned aside, took a woodland path, and made straight for the retired bungalow in which dwelt Mr. Samuel Pegge.

Styler's heart began to thump in his bosom. This, he informed himself gaily, this was a bit of all right; this was a real, proper adventure! Visiting Samuel Pegge, alias Septimus Philcox, latish in the evening, in secret fashion—good! Now if only he could trans-

form himself into one of those spirits that you hear about, and get into that bungalow unseen, and be present at the interview that was coming, and overhear all that was said between them there? —ah, that would indeed be a fair, good cop! But as Styler was essentially material, such a convenient course was utterly impracticable, and the only thing he could do was to do what he could—under the circumstances.

Styler was sufficiently acquainted with Mr. Pegge's domestic arrangements to know that the good gentleman lived alone. His household requirements were seen to by a village dame who came at ten and left at five; consequently Mr. Pegge's evenings were spent in solitude. Therefore he, Styler, would have little difficulty in prospecting around the bungalow. And when he had heard Mrs. Renton and her companion admitted, he left his shoes under a convenient holly-bush in the lane, stole into the garden, made his way from tree to tree and hedge to hedge, and finally crept into the verandah, to look cautiously through the window of the one apartment in which a light was shown.

There was nothing before that window but a lace curtain, carelessly drawn, and Styler, keeping himself well within the shadow of the porch, had a clear, uninterrupted view of the room and its occupants. Mr. Pegge appeared to have been enjoying a quiet evening when his visitors interrupted him. There was a bright fire on his hearth, an easy-chair was drawn up to the fender, and on the table in the middle of the room stood a decanter, a syphon, and a tobacco-jar. On that table lay also a pile of magazines and news-

papers and a yellow-backed novel, which Mr. Pegge had evidently thrown down, face foremost, when the knock came at his door.

The three occupants of the room were already in conversation when Styler contrived to get a view of them. Mrs. Renton occupied the easy-chair which Mr. Pegge had just vacated; her companion sat in another on the other side of the table. Mr. Pegge stood, a briar pipe in his hand, on the hearth-rug between them. He was listening with close attention to whatever it was that the other man was saying, and Styler cursed the builder of that bungalow for building it so well. It was evidently no jerry-built erection, for the window fitted properly and tightly; not a sound came to him through any crack or crevice. And though he watched and waited a good half-hour he heard nothing, saw nothing, out of the common. The three people appeared to be discussing something—something of a serious nature, to judge by the expression of their respective faces. Now Mrs. Renton talked, now her companion talked, now Mr. Pegge talked. They appeared to be on very good terms; the elderly gentleman accepted Mr. Pegge's hospitality, and took a whiskey-and-soda at his hands and lighted a cigar from a box which Mr. Pegge reached down from a shelf over the fireplace. In fact, they seemed to be very friendly together, and again Styler anathematized the builder of the bungalow.

"I hope his rent doesn't pay him for what he laid out on the infernal place!" soliloquized Styler. "If he'd only put some green wood into this confounded

window when he was running the show up there'd have been cracks in it by now that you could have shoved your finger through, and then I should have heard what these three are talking about. Can't hear as much as a fly's buzz, as it is! Anyway, they're discussing something serious—tell that by their faces.”

At the end of half an hour Mr. Pegge's visitors rose and showed unmistakeable signs of departing, and Styler accordingly slipped off to the gate, secured his shoes, and hid himself in the bushes at the side of the lane. Presently Mrs. Renton and her companion came out of the bungalow and went homewards, and Styler kept his ears open, hoping that they might drop an illuminating remark or two as they passed him. But they went down the lane in silence; the fragrant odour of the cigar which the man was smoking faded away; the sound of the footsteps died, and Styler was alone with the spring night.

After a period of indecision he went slowly towards The Warren. He was far from satisfied, in spite of the fact that he had discovered a very interesting addition to his store of knowledge. It was certainly something—perhaps a good deal—to have found out that Mrs. Renton and this companion of hers were on friendly and intimate terms with the ex-convict, some time chairman and director of the once famous Imperial Splendour Development and Enterprise Society. Suddenly Styler started—almost jumped in his shoes, which he had very thankfully reassumed.

“Gad!” he exclaimed under his breath. “Gad!—of course, they don't know who the old chap is! They

don't know that Samuel Pegge is Septimus Philcox! Of course not!—Mrs. Renton only looks on the old faker as a neighbour. And yet I'll swear that wasn't a mere friendly call to-night. Not it!—it was a real, serious, business interview! What about? Hang it!—confound it!—what was it about?"

Juts then Styler found himself abreast of one of the entrance gates of The Warren. A sudden brilliant notion struck him; he pushed open the gate, walked into the grounds, marched resolutely to the front door and rang the bell. He heard the sound of its sharp peal ring through the quiet house; in another moment he found himself confronted by a trim parlourmaid who look at him with obvious astonishment.

"Mrs. Renton within?" demanded Styler. "Just so—thank you. Would you have the kindness to ask her if she will see Mr. Styler—Mr. Smith's clerk? Tell her I've come down from London on purpose to see her."

The maid memorized this message with an effort, and invited Styler to step within, and disappeared into a room on the right-hand side of the hall, in the window of which Styler had seen lights as he reached the house. Presently she was back with an invitation to the caller to advance, and Styler, who had already prompted himself for the part he was going to play, stepped forward to meet Mrs. Renton, who, looking very much surprised, had come to the door of the room.

"Good evening, ma'am," said Styler, chock-full of self-assurance and confidence. "I'm sorry to trouble

you at this late hour, but a question occurred to us after you'd left——”

Mrs. Renton beckoned him to walk in, and closed the door when she had followed him. She indicated the elderly gentleman, who had now finished Mr. Pegge's cigar, and was just then selecting a cheroot from an old-fashioned case. He interrupted himself in this task to clap a monocle in his right eye and to stare at Styler with interest.

“My brother, Major Esmondhaugh, of whom you heard me speak this afternoon,” said Mrs. Renton. “Major Esmondhaugh is quite conversant with what happened at Mr. Tress's to-day, Mr. Styler, so you can speak before him. What is it—and how did you know that I was here?”

“Made inquiry at your hotel, ma'am, and heard that you had left for the country,” said the unblushing Styler. “So as there was a question or two of importance, I jumped up on my motor-cycle and ran down. About that call of yours on Miss Brock, now, Mrs. Renton?” he went on, taking the chair which Mrs. Renton pointed to. “Could you refresh your memory, ma'am, sufficiently to remember whether anything—any little thing—happened which suggested to you, or would suggest itself to you, upon reflection, that Miss Brock lured you there—lured you, mind!—to meet somebody!”

Mrs. Renton, who had been gazing at her visitor with great curiosity, started.

“I hadn't thought of that,” she said reflectively. “But I told you that she kept continually going to the

window and looking out on the street. That may have meant what you suggest."

"And that—shall we call it restlessness, ma'am?—did it seem to—to abate when she got that telegram you told us of?" inquired Styler. "Seem small things, these, no doubt, but they're of high importance."

"After she received the wire," answered Mrs. Renton, "she simply asked me—as I told you—to go away."

"Just so, just so!" said Styler shaking his head mysteriously. "Of course, that explains it—the other party didn't turn up. You can't rack your memory to the point of recollecting that she ever referred to—to another party coming, eh, ma'am?"

"I can assure you, without racking my memory, that she never did!" replied Mrs. Renton with decision. "I'm positive of that."

Styler rose and shook his head still more mysteriously.

"Ah, to be sure, ma'am, to be sure!" he said. "No—she wouldn't, Mrs. Renton, she wouldn't! Meant to spring it as a surprise on you, ma'am—that was it. Oh, yes, of course!"

"Meant to spring what as a surprise?" asked Mrs. Renton.

But Styler raised a deprecating hand.

"You must excuse me, ma'am," he said, with a sly smile. "State secrets, you know, ma'am. It's important, though, to know that there is some indication

—shown by the unfortunate lady's frequent visits to the window—that she was expecting somebody.”

Then Styler bowed himself out, explaining, in answer to Mrs. Renton's inquiries, that he was putting up at the *Lynne Arms* for the night. And to that hostelry he straightway betook himself as soon as he was clear of The Warren, and, once installed within it, he sat up gossiping with the landlord until midnight, and when he went to bed it was with the comfortable consciousness of having learnt several important things wherewith to regale Smith's ears on his return from his own mission.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE ESMONDHAUGH PEDIGREE

STYLER, who was given to enjoying himself whenever professional duties carried him into the country, lay between the lavender-scented sheets of his bed at the *Lynne Arms* until a comparatively late hour next morning, and subsequently trifled over what he called a truly rural breakfast of ham and eggs until nearly eleven o'clock. He had done all that he wanted to do, and he had several hours of leisure available before keeping his appointment with his master at the chambers in Pump Court. And being fond of the country, he determined to make a detour in returning to town. He would cut along through Dorking, and on to Reigate, and perhaps as far as Sevenoaks, resting now and then at one of those wayside inns which some undeveloped artistic sense in his composition made specially appealing to him. It was a fine day, and there were good roads, and you can cover a heap of country in seven hours on a good motor-bicycle. Therefore before noon struck from the church clock Styler paid his bill, said farewell to the landlord, to whom he jocosely remarked that he never need be surprised at seeing him, and departed eastward. But as he sped down the village street it suddenly occurred to him that it would seem unmannerly and ill-bred if he did not call at the police-station and pass the time of

day to the inspector; wherefore he presently pulled up his machine, and in due course was ushered into that worthy officer's sanctum.

The inspector, busied over sundry blue papers, stretched out a hand and allowed his stern features to relax into a grin.

"It's a queer thing!—I was just thinking about you," said he. "Thinking I should have something to tell you next time we met, do you see?"

"This is the time," responded Styler. "Always open for news."

"You know that Indian thing—charm, keepsake, or whatever it is," continued the inspector. "Bit of gold, you know."

"I know—I remember," answered Styler. "What of it?"

"I've found out who owns it," said his companion with another grin. "In short, he's got it. And I—that is we—have got that!"

He pointed to a reserved portion of his desk, on which a crisp new Bank of England note lay under a paper-weight. Styler calmly and unceremoniously lifted the paper-weight aside and looked at the denomination of the note.

"Fiver, eh," he observed. "Reward, I suppose? Oh!—and to whom did, or does, the charm belong, then?"

"Major Esmondhaugh—Mrs. Renton's brother," replied the inspector. "Military man—I dare say you've seen him about. He was here when the Kesteven affair happened."

"Ah, I dare say I've set eyes on him," remarked Styler carelessly. "Big chap, grey moustache. Oh—so it belongs to him, does it? Well, I dare say you can do with a fiver as well as anybody else, and it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good."

"Oh, there'll be two or three of us to share at that," said the inspector. "Yes—it's Major Esmondhaugh's is that charm. He came in here about an hour ago. 'Oh!' he says, 'I say—when I was down here at my sister's the other day, I lost a trinket off my watch-chain—a little bit of gold, carved and ornamented—and I want to offer a reward to anybody who finds or has found it—I'll offer five pounds,' he says. 'It was a keepsake. I don't know where I lost it,' he says. 'It may have been in the street here, or in the lane going up to The Warren, or it may have been in some of these woodland paths in the park at Lynne Court—I was walking about there for an hour or two in the evening. Can you put a paper or two up about the village, offering five pounds?' he says. 'I'm anxious to get it back—it was a keepsake,' he says again. So I made no more to-do about it, but got the thing out and handed it to him. And mighty surprised he was, I can tell you. 'Now where did you find it?' says he. 'In one of the paths at Lynne Court, when we were searching, after the murder,' says I. 'Ah, to be sure!' he says. 'I was round about there that very evening,' he says. And then he said we must have this fiver, and forked it out, handsome enough, and there it is. So you see there's no mystery about that charm, after all," concluded the inspector. "Plain enough, that. Well,

and how are you getting on? Been down here on the look-out, I reckon?"

"I left something behind me last time I was here," answered Styler. "Oh, I've no particular news. Those London folks of yours made any inquiry here about this Miss Brock affair yet?"

"Not yet," answered the inspector. "I'm expecting they will, though. Now—what do you think? Was it another job by the same hand, that?"

"If I was to tell you what I think," replied Styler, "I would be here all day. However, I don't mind saying that I think we shall all have a big surprise in the end. And I'm glad to find you well, and I'll bid you good morning—I've got an appointment with my guv'nor."

But before that appointment was kept Styler had done a lot of thinking, and he was quite ready for discussion when he had made his report of all these things to Smith in the quiet chambers in Pump Court. Smith, who had listened with silent attention, was eager on his part, to sum things up.

"Now, Styler," he said, drawing a sheet of paper towards him and beginning to scribble, "let's summarize what we know from these inquiries or discoveries of yours; I'll jot them down—there's nothing like seeing things in black and white, even if they go into the fire or the basket immediately afterwards.

"1st. We now know that Major Esmondhaugh was down there at Lynne on the night of Kesteven's murder.

"2nd. We know that he was in Lynne Court woods that night, or evening, and lost a trinket there, about the loss of which he's quite candid.

"3rd——

"There's a point about that second point," interrupted Styler. "Why didn't the Major announce his loss immediately? Why did he wait to tell the police of it until several days later? Had my visit to his sister's house last night anything to do with his going to the police this morning?"

"In plain words, Styler," said Smith, "you want to know a lot more about Major Esmondhaugh,"

"In plain words, sir," replied Styler, "we've got to know a lot more about both Major Esmondhaugh and Mrs. Renton—both of 'em! I say—we've got to!"

"Very good—I agree," said Smith. "And—we are going to. For—to resume:

"3rd. We now know that between Mrs. Renton, Major Esmondhaugh, and Mr. Samuel Pegge—otherwise Septimus Philcox—some secret exists."

"Is it a secret—or a business matter—or something that's quite innocent?" asked Styler. "I've figured it up in all sorts of ways. They might have gone to see the old chap on several matters. Of one thing I'm certain, Mr. Smith—they don't know that Samuel Pegge is Septimus Philcox."

"Why?" asked Smith.

"Because I'm sure Major Esmondhaugh's a gentleman—looks it, anyway," replied Styler, "and I can't understand a gentleman accepting a whiskey-and-soda and a cigar from an ex-convict. See?"

Smith's eyes twinkled behind his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Septimus Philcox, Styler, my son," he said, "was one of the most unctuous and plausible gentlemen of his day. There are a large number of folk who still believe that he was a very badly-treated man, and that, if the law had only left him alone, he would have pulled round the affairs of the Imperial Splendour concern and made vast sums for the investors. Major Esmondhaugh—retired military men are notoriously eccentric, for some occult reason which nobody has ever explained—may be one of those investors who still cherish a profound belief in Septimus. But I'll tell you what, Styler—there's one little matter we ought to go into, and that is—who are Major Esmondhaugh and his sister, Mrs. Renton? We know nothing about them! They may be members of the wrong lot, for all we know. We must look them up. What books of reference have we in the place, Styler? What have you got in your room?"

Styler rose and disappeared into his own sanctum, where he began to search amongst a shelf full of reference works.

"We've an old Peerage," he announced through the open door, "and there's a Baronetage—it's last year's, that—and there's an old 'Who's Who,' and there's a dozen or two of that Army List that you get every month, and several Whitaker's Almanacs."

"The Army List, of course," said Smith, who prided himself on his connexion with military matters as a member of an Inns of Court battalion. "Bring

that—the major'll be in there, anyhow. Here we are," he continued, after turning the paper over a little. "Here he is—Godfrey Hamilton Esmondhaugh, D. S. O., M. V. O., late 91st Lancers—that's he, of course, Styler. But that doesn't tell us anything about his family. Let me think, now—I've rather a notion that there's a North-country family of that name; we really must have proper books of reference, Styler!—you must order them at once—all sorts of them. Esmondhaugh!—look in Whitaker, and see if there's anybody of that name amongst the knights or baronets—there are so many new ones made in these democratic days that they're as common as blackberries, and even the biggest tuft-hunter can't keep 'em in mind!"

"There's a Sir Godfrey Dawkes Esmondhaugh in the list of baronets," announced Styler, consulting Whitaker's Almanac, "and he isn't a mushroom, for he was created in 1681."

Smith uttered an excited exclamation and reached for the Baronetage, which Styler had brought in from the other room.

"Good—good!" he said. "I knew I'd heard the name—see what it is to have a good memory! Esmondhaugh, now—ah, here we are, Styler—we've hit it! Listen!—here's the whole lot. Um!—this is how it runs, what it amounts to—leaving the ornamental parts out. Godfrey Dawkes Esmondhaugh, ninth baronet, of Esmondhaugh, Northumberland, and 563 Eaton Square, S. W. A Deputy-Lieutenant. Some-time M. P. Owns 3,167 acres. Born July 12th, 1837

—an old gentleman, Styler, Widower. Wife was Joan Cicely, daughter of Sir David Chillinglin, of Chillinglin Tower, Northumberland. Has issue Godfrey Hamilton, a Major in the Army, born 1875—that's our man; also Rosalind, born 1884, married 1906, Arthur Charles Renton, Esquire, of 320, Upper Brook Street, W.; also Maud, born 1885, married 1913, John Patrick Angus, sixth Earl of Oronsay. Styler!"

"Sir!" exclaimed Styler, startled by his master's sharp exclamation.

"Did you hear that, Styler? Mrs. Renton's—and Major Esmondhaugh's—sister is a countess!"

"I heard, sir. I also heard another thing. Her name's Maud."

Smith looked up from the pages of the Baronetage.

"Well?" he said.

"The name of the lady referred to in that marriage certificate was Maud," answered Styler.

"Ah!" said Smith. "So it was. Maud Eleanor Rivers, of Broom Lodge, Northumberland, spinster. Um!—well, Maud is not an uncommon Christian name for ladies. Get that Peerage, Styler—it's only a year or two old, I think."

Styler fetched a heavy volume and Smith turned its pages over until he came to the entry he wanted.

"Here we are," he said. "John Patrick Angus Chisholm-Huntley, sixth Earl of Oronsay, etcetera, etcetera—lot of details that don't concern us. Born 1881—married—yes, that's it—Maud, second daughter of Sir Godfrey Esmondhaugh, Baronet. Lives

Oronsay Castle, N. B., and 86 Upper Grosvenor Street, W. Styler!"

Again Styler started at the sharp exclamation.

"Didn't that taxi-cab driver say that he drove Miss Brock and the strange man to the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street from Laburnum Terrace?" asked Smith.

"He did," replied Styler.

Smith closed the book and rose.

"We're beginning to find out something, but I don't know what it is," he remarked. "This——"

The telephone bell in the outer office suddenly rang, and Styler, going to it, presently came back with a meaning look.

"Dr. Hextall wants us—both!—at once," he said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE GREEKS INTERVENE

SMITH reached for his hat and coat as soon as he heard Hextall's message. But in the act of putting them on he stopped and looked at Styler with some concern.

"That's awkward," he said. "There's the cablegram! One of us ought to be here to take it in. Did Hextall say he wanted both of us—particularly?"

"He said, 'Can you both come round to see me at once?'" replied Styler. "But he didn't seem particularly agitated."

Smith considered matters and quickly came to a decision.

"I don't want to have any delay if that cablegram comes in," he said. "You stop here, for a while at any rate, and if it comes, bring it on to Hextall's place. Ring me up there to say you're coming. And I'll telephone you if there's anything particular going on."

He hastened away into the Strand and hailing the first empty taxi-cab he saw, drove straight to Hextall's house in Wimpole Street. Hextall was evidently on the look-out for him, and led him at once into his private room.

"I say, Smith!" he began, "this is getting confoundedly serious. Can't we do something? Some-

thing will have to be done! If not—well, I'm afraid—in fact, I'm certain—something will happen.”

Smith had already seen that Hextall was nervous, excited, and disturbed; he himself accordingly became purposely calm, matter-of-fact, and business-like. He took off hat and coat, picked out the easiest chair, and coolly lighted a cigarette.

“Now, my dear fellow,” he said, “you’d better tell me what has happened. But I think I can tell you. You’ve had some of those chaps from the police headquarters to see you. They’ve been bothering you with questions about Miss Paquita. Come!”

Hextall made a gesture of impatient vexation.

“I’d one of ’em last night,” he exclaimed, “and another this morning, and two more an hour ago, all asking what I consider to be the most ridiculous questions! Did I think this possible?—did I consider that possible?—had I noticed that?—had I seen this? I told them all that it seemed to me that they were trying to get me to suggest how Miss Tress could or did or might have shot Kesteven!”

“Why, of course, my dear Hextall, and what else do you suppose the poor men came for?” answered Smith with a laugh. “They’ve their work to do, their solemn duties to perform, and naturally they jump at any chance there is of getting somebody to help in the work and lighten the duties. They’d be infinitely obliged to you if you would simplify matters, and say at once that you believe it’s quite possible that Miss Paquita did shoot Kesteven. They’re not very par-

ticular, these gentlemen, about motive—unless it is obvious and of assistance to them; what they like is plain, straight proof. But now, did you manage to get anything out of them? Did they tell you if they are going to act on Walters' information? Are they going to arrest Miss Tress?"

"Oh, I don't know!" replied Hextall with a groan. "Those two who were here an hour ago said something very guarded about never taking extreme steps until a very strong case is made out, but——"

"Exactly, and they've been bothering you in the hopes of strengthening their case," said Smith. "I hope you've adopted a consistent line all through with them? What line have you taken, now?"

"I've told them plainly that Miss Tress is a somnambulist subject, and that it is absolutely impossible that she could have shot Kesteven while in a state of somnambulism," replied Hextall. "One of them actually wanted to know if I thought it possible for her to have gone out and shot Kesteven while in her normal condition, and to have lapsed into a somnambulist state after the deed was done and before returning to the house! Ass!"

"Say rather a scientific speculator whose ideas have not yet reached maturity," remarked Smith. "Well, I told you and Tress that ever since Walters gave that information to the police there's always been the danger of Miss Paquita's arrest—it just depends on what amount of importance the head authorities attach to the footman's statement, and what corrobora-

tive evidence they can scrape together. Of course, there's the element of suspicion—there's no use in denying it. And the great thing to do, Hextall, in order to relieve you and everybody else of all anxiety, is to find the man or woman who murdered both Kesteven and Miss Brock—for as sure as fate those murders were the work of one hand!"

"Man or woman?" repeated Hextall. "Do you really think it might have been a woman's work?"

"Why not? Any woman can use a revolver," replied Smith. "There are circumstances—I needn't go into them yet—which make me think that the murderer possibly was a woman. You must remember that woman is more elusive than man—in more senses and way than one—and that she has more cunning, greater skill in deception, and better opportunities of concealment. Yes, it may have been a woman's hand, Hextall, that took the life of both those two."

Hextall, who had been restlessly pacing up and down the room, came to a halt on the hearthrug, and gave Smith a searching glance.

"Honour bright, Smith!" he exclaimed. "Do you really think you're going to find out who did it—in either case? I want to know."

"Honour bright, I believe I shall find out who did it in both cases," replied Smith. "And as I've already said, I believe we've only one culprit to deal with. There are many strands in this rope, many twists and turns in this web, Hextall, but we're gradually finding the ends of some and untying the knots in others. Of

one thing I'm very sure—the motive for these murders will prove to be a very surprising one. And I can assure you of this much now, with a certainty that's unassailable—it's nothing whatever to do with your friends the Tresses. Darrell and Paquita Tress are mere accidents—mere straws that have by sheer chance been sucked into this swirling whirlpool. I know that!—know it, I say. That's why I should view with equanimity any proposal on the part of the police to charge Miss Paquita. It would be unpleasant for her; it would mean her detention at Brixton for a few days, but——”

Hextall's parlourmaid entered the room just then, and Smith rose to his feet before she could speak.

“You're wanting me at the telephone,” he said. “Ah, I thought so! Excuse me a minute, Hextall—I think Styler's ringing me up.”

He was so certain about this supposition that he immediately hailed Styler with an inquiry about the cablegram. Styler answered just as laconically.

“It's come—just now!”

“Bring it here at once,” commanded Smith. He went back to Hextall, dropped into the easy-chair again, and went on with his interrupted discourse. “It would be unpleasant for Paquita,” he said, “if she were arrested and charged with causing Kesteven's death; it would be unpleasant for her brother, unpleasant for everybody. But,” he went on to point out, “such unpleasantnesses are sometimes unpreventable; in any case, the charge against Paquita must break down; and the publicity given to the affair

might possibly help in establishing the guilt of the real criminal."

"I'd rather it was established in some other fashion," said Hextall grimly; "I want to keep Miss Tress out of it. It's an extraordinary thing to me that the police can't do something! Instead of wasting all that time asking me questions, why don't they go after that man who was seen with Miss Brock? Why don't they——"

"My dear fellow!" interrupted Smith, with a laugh. "You don't understand our police methods. I knew what would happen as soon as ever I heard that Walters had blabbed. Your official policeman is always pleased with the obvious. Now, you see, it is undoubtedly obvious that Miss Paquita Tress was somewhere in Kesteven's vicinity about the time of the murder in company with a revolver—therefore——"

"Therefore they immediately forgot the fact that Miss Brock was last seen alive in the company of a strange man whom they don't seem to have done anything to trace!" exclaimed Hextall bitterly.

"Oh, well, you don't know what they've done, or are doing!" said Smith. "You don't quite know what I am doing, or have done."

"I'd rather know that than know what the others are after," answered Hextall. "I suppose you're playing some deep game—but I'm awfully anxious, Smith—awfully!"

"Well," observed Smith as Styler was ushered into the room, "here comes something that may possibly give you some information—it's a message from three

and a half thousand miles away, Hextall. And I dare say it may seem meaningless to you—but it may mean a good deal to me. That is, when I've read it out."

He slowly opened the envelope which Styler handed to him, and with equal slowness spread out the sheet which it enclosed. There at any rate was an answer. He read it silently and deliberately.

"From Sam Edwards, Georgetown, to Smith, Pump Court, London.

"Yours with remittance through Polbeck and Brine received. Man concerned committed suicide at Cayenne three weeks ago. Was convicted in Paris six years since under the name of Spencer Ellis; had been known to me as Charleston Legette, American citizen. If this matter is mixed up with Kesteven affair now reported in our papers, can communicate important evidence. Cable me as above, and if necessary can catch next steamer to England."

Smith took off his spectacles and silently handed the cablegram to Styler. He watched Styler read it, and then motioned him to pass it to Hextall. Hextall read it, gave it back to Smith, and shook his head.

"I don't know what it means, of course," he said. "I suppose you do. What's more pertinent to me is—does the receipt of that help you? Has it thrown any further light——"

He broke off as the parlourmaid entered again—this time with a card. Hextall glanced at it and turned to Smith with a half-smothered exclamation of anger.

"It's one of those men from the police again!" he muttered. "Hang it all, I——"

"My dear fellow, have this man shown in at once," said Smith. "Certainly—certainly! He no doubt thinks he is being extraordinarily polite to you in taking so much trouble—you don't know how suave our police can be if they wish. Let him come in immediately."

The man who entered—one of the two who had called at Darrell Tress's flat on the previous afternoon—was indeed suave and gentle enough. He greeted Smith and Styler with a polite, good-humoured smile, and turned apologetically to Hextall.

"You'll think I've never done bothering you, doctor," he said, as he took a chair. "But the fact is, I thought I'd better let you know how things are going. I'm afraid the young lady will have to give some explanation, sir, if she can."

"In plain language," said Hextall a little irritably, "you mean that she's to be arrested? Better say it straight out."

The detective looked at Smith and smiled again.

"Well, if you like plain language, sir—yes," he said. "Probably to-morrow morning. You see, there's sufficient evidence to warrant it. I dare say you'll be surprised, gentlemen, but the fact is—the valet's split!"

"The valet? Fowler?" exclaimed Hextall.

"Exactly, doctor; Fowler," quietly answered the detective. "He's been round this evening—to say that he wasn't going to keep things back any longer. He's

told about that affair at the flat to which you were fetched. And you know, sir, if the young lady was inclined to use her revolver that night, why——”

Once more the parlourmaid opened the door—this time to admit a visitor who was evidently in a great hurry. Hextall and Smith jumped to their feet at the first glimpse of him—Mr. Victor Demetriadi—gay, debonair, bubbling over with some exciting news. He came forward to Hextall with a wide smile and an outstretched hand.

“Good evening—how do you do—ver’ well?” he exclaimed. “Oh, yes!—I have just come round to tell you something good. I think that my friend Chim-bouloglos and I have—yes!—what you call spotted the man what killed Kesteven and that poor little governess—oh, yes!”

CHAPTER XXIX

THE CAFÉ NOIR

THE four men who stood about the room in various attitudes of surprise stared at Mr. Victor Demetriadi as if he had suddenly fallen through the ceiling as a direct bolt from the blue. For a moment there was a dead silence; then Smith moved a step towards the new-comer, who had continued to smile at the group as if highly delighted with the effect he had produced.

"You—what?" said Smith. "What?"

Demetriadi waved his hand with an expressive gesture.

"Oh, yes!" he exclaimed. "You are—eh?—surprised? Not at all—when I say it to you, eh?"

"Say it, for God's sake, then!" said Smith. He turned to Hextall with an inquiring glance. "One of your two Greek gentlemen, of course?" he muttered. "Good heavens—what an interposition!"

"Mr. Demetriadi," replied Hextall. "Sit down, Mr. Demetriadi. You've something to tell us?"

Demetriadi sat down and pulled out his cigarette-case.

"You permit, eh?" he said. "Oh, yes—I have something. I came to you, doctor, straight—yes? These gentlemen—friends of yours?"

"You've met me before," interposed Smith suddenly. "You've forgotten. I met you and Chimbou-

loglos in Manchester last winter—at Mr. Porri's house."

"So?" exclaimed Demetriadi. "Ah, I remember—you are Smith—yes? I remember your spectacles—of course. You are well?"

"I shall be a lot better when I know what you've come to tell us," answered Smith. "You say that you and Chimbouloglos have spotted the man who killed Kesteven and Miss Brock——"

"Oh, well, well, we think we have good ideas," answered Demetriadi, airily. "Not certain, you know, but very likely. I tell you what we know—and have seen, eh? You see, doctor," he continued, turning to Hextall, "Chimbouloglos and I, when we have some talk with you not so long ago, after that little affair at the flat round the corner, we do not tell you everything. We say nothing about how we first see that man Kesteven, how we become acquainted with him—no?"

"Yes, you did," replied Hextall. "You said you met him at the Café Imperial and got into conversation with him.

"So—so!—but that was not all!" exclaimed Demetriadi. "You see, Chimbouloglos and me, we dine that night very late at the Café Imperial—this man, Kesteven, dined, too, at the next table, eh? Well, to him as he eats comes another man—also good-looking, fine man—and they talk much. The other man, he does not dine—he has a drink or two, and smokes his cigar—always he and Kesteven, they talk a great deal, in low voices, you understand. At last,

he goes away, this other man, away out of the café altogether. And somehow—I do not know how—Chimbouloglos and me, we get talking to Kesteven, you understand—somehow or other we get friendly, eh? And in the end he ask us to that little game of cards—yes?”

Smith glanced at the man from New Scotland Yard.

“Mr. Demetriadi,” he remarked, “is referring to the incident at Mr. Tress’s flat, about which Fowler, the valet, has been kind enough to split. Mr. Demetriadi is one of the two gentlemen who were there.”

“Oh, yes, I was there!” said Demetriadi with a chuckle. “It was me that was to be shot for cheating—pho! But we forget all that now—it is nothing! What we don’t forget, Chimbouloglos and me, is Kesteven. And when we see about his murder in the paper we think much—great deal. However, we just then go away from London—go to Brighton for a few days, you understand—enjoying ourselves. And we don’t have no time to think about murders while we are at Brighton—better fun there, eh? But the other day we come back, and the night we get to London again we go to dine with Chimbouloglos’s uncle, Mr. Antonio Chimbouloglos, at his house in Park Lane, you see—very rich man, old Antonio—you know him? Yes—great collector of pictures and so on. Well, old Antonio he give us very good dinner, and show us his pictures, but we get—you know—bit sick of that—and we want to see something more lively. So we say good night to Mr. Antonio at just before

ten o'clock, and tell him we now go home to our hotel, eh? And then we set off down Park Lane, arm in arm, to go somewhere where is more fun. And it is then we catch sight of that man what I tell you of—the man who was talking with Kesteven at the Café Imperial. You understand?"

"Where, exactly, did you see this man?" asked Smith.

"I tell you. At the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street—he come along that street. And," added Demetriadi with a significant smile which showed his white teeth under his black moustache, "he is not alone, eh?"

"Not alone? Who was with him, then?" demanded Smith.

Demetriadi threw away his cigarette and snapped his fingers. "I tell you!" he said with emphasis. "Miss Brock."

Smith glanced at the other three faces, all tense with excitement. He turned to the Greek with an assumed air of incredulity.

"Oh, come!" he said. "How do you know it was Miss Brock?"

"We didn't know—then," answered Demetriadi. "All we know then was that it was the man we have seen with Kesteven at the Café Imperial—couldn't mistake him! And a young lady—slim, petite, pretty, fair-haired. When we read the newspapers next day, then we knew that was the little governess—Miss Brock. Oh, yes!"

The four listeners remained silent for a moment or two. Then the detective asked a quiet question.

"What were these two people doing, Mr. Demetriadi?"

"Oh, just walk and talk—walk pretty quick," replied the Greek. "They pass us, right under the lamp at the corner of the street, and go on."

"Did you notice in which direction?" asked the detective.

"Oh, yes—I tell you about that. They cross over to Stanhope Gate, you call it—go into the Park," answered Demetriadi.

"You're sure of that?"

"Oh, yes, quite sure. We watch them. I say to George Chimbouloglos, 'That is the fellow that was talking to Kesteven what was murdered.' And Chimbouloglos, he say, 'I saw him.' Oh, there is no doubt about it! I am what you call, quick of the—eh, apprehension."

"Well?" said Smith, after a pause. "What next?"

"Ah, what next?—just so," responded Demetriadi with another smile. "That is where the fun comes in—eh? Next day we hear about the murder in Hyde Park—we read it in the papers. We read how the young lady was like. We look at each other. We say, 'That is the young woman we see last night with that man!' I say so—Chimbouloglos he also says so. We both say, 'There is no doubt about it'—we are not what you call thick-heads—no! Then we say—if ever we see that man again, another time, eh?"

"Just so!" exclaimed Smith. "If!"

The Greek laughed and flourished a new cigarette just drawn from his case.

"Ah!" he said. "We have seen him. We see him now—at least, Chimbouloglos, he sees him! Yes—oh—yes!"

"Sees him? Chimbouloglos? Where?" demanded Smith. "For heaven's sake, man, don't trifle about a thing like this!"

Demetriadi calmly lighted his cigarette and threw the match away with another flourish.

"All right," he said confidently. "Don't upset of yourself. Chimbouloglos has two eyes in front of his head and two at the back. It is this way—to-night we go dine at the Café Noir—you know the Café Noir? Newly opened restaurant. Nice place—more like Paris than London, you know—yes. And as we finish our dinner, that man comes to take his! You understand?"

Smith, who had laid aside his hat and coat on entering Hextall's room made a start towards the chair on which he had tossed them.

"Good Lord!" he muttered under his breath. "Come on!" he exclaimed. "Let's all get to this place as quick as we can—we're wasting—have wasted—time. Come, all of you!"

"Oh, all right, all right!" said Demetriadi, still full of imperturbable sang-froid. "Don't distress yourself, my dear Mr. Smith. We listen to him order his dinner—it will be a good hour while he finish all that. It is now not half an hour since I leave there and hurry here, and Chimbouloglos, he watch that man

like a cat watch the mouse. If that man go, Chim-bouloglos follows—if he went into never mind where, George Chimbouloglos will go too. All right!”

“Better use some caution, too, sir,” suggested Styler. “It wouldn’t do for four of us to walk in there together. And there’s another thing.” He turned and looked knowingly at the detective. “He might be familiar with you?” he went on. “That wouldn’t do, you know.”

“I don’t think he’d know me,” said the detective. “All the same, there’s a good deal in what you say. And I don’t advise the lot of us going there. That’s no good. Now,” he continued, examining Styler critically, “if anybody’s going to do any shadowing, I should say you’d be the one. Let me suggest something, sir,” he added, turning to Smith. “We can all centre on this Café Noir—I know where it is—but we’ll go separately, and we won’t enter—except your assistant here, as I take him to be. Let Mr. Demetriadi go back—let Mr. Styler follow closely on his heels. Mr. Styler can order something, and he’ll quickly find out which the man is—Mr. Demetriadi’ll give him the office. When the man leaves, let Mr. Styler follow. We others can be on the look out in the street—we shall get a glimpse of the chap, anyway, and we can keep Mr. Styler in sight.”

The party of five split up into two sections. Styler went off with the Greek in one taxi-cab; Hextall, Smith, and the detective followed in another. At Oxford Circus Styler and his companion left their cab

and walked away down the side street in which the new establishment known as the Café Noir had recently opened its doors. Before they reached it, Demetriadi, who was obviously deriving great enjoyment from his adventure, pulled Styler by the sleeve.

"Now," he said in a whisper, "we make our strategy, eh? I go in and join my friend—yes? We are at a little table not far within—the man, he is at a table opposite. You come in later—you take a seat same side as us—you look across and you see sim—a big fellow, looks as if he might have been a soldier—moustache turned up, you understand?"

"All right," answered Styler. "I'll spot him, mister. And when he goes out, I shall give you a look, and if I'm right you'll give me one, and then I shall follow him. And mind you, if you do a bit of following, be careful. Don't follow him, follow me. I'm used to their games—been at 'em ever since I was fifteen."

The Greek nodded, and presently entered the swinging doors of the restaurant. Styler let a few minutes elapse before he followed. Then he, too, assumed a careless air, and lounged into the new establishment, glanced casually around him, and dropped into a seat near the table at which Demetriadi and Chimbouloglos were sitting. For a moment he occupied himself in ordering something which could be served without delay. When the waiter had left him he took an apparently careless look at his neighbours. And there, exactly opposite to him, was the man whom Deme-

triadi had described leisurely reading an evening paper as he smoked his cigar and sipped his coffee.

Styler had no knowledge of this man. He knew a great many shady characters of the West End; this man was an absolute stranger to him. He saw at once that he might be said to answer the description given to the police by the maid-servant of Laburnum Terrace and the driver of the taxi-cab who had taken Miss Brock and a companion to the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street. But he also saw that the man was of a somewhat common type—tall, inclining to elderliness, of a military appearance, well-dressed a veritable man-about-town specimen of humanity. Could this be the man for whom the police were already on the look-out?—would he dare to show himself so openly in a restaurant to which, on account of its newness and originality, a good many people were going just then? He might, reflected Styler; he might, believing that there was safety in sheer boldness. It was a good half-hour after his own entrance that Styler followed the tall stranger out of the Café Noir and sauntered behind him into Oxford Street. Within a minute of leaving the restaurant he passed Hextall, and then the detective, and then Smith. Styler's face was blank as a stone wall as he elbowed past them, but he contrived to give each a nudge as he slowly edged by on the track of his quarry.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LIGHTED WINDOW

THE tall stranger walked leisurely away in the direction of Oxford Circus, calmly puffing at a fresh cigar which he had taken from a well-filled case just before leaving the restaurant. His movements, his whole air and bearing, began to puzzle Styler—they were certainly not those of a hunted man, not those of a man who knows that he is an object of suspicion to somebody, who is aware that there has been a description of him in the newspapers which must infallibly lead to his arrest or to interference with his freedom. To watch him as he strolled along through the evening crowd was to gather an idea of his own feeling of liberty and independence—there was nothing furtive in his air, nothing in his manner to make any one think that he was afraid of being seen. At the north-east corner of Oxford Circus he paused deliberately, looked about him, glanced at a neighbouring clock, drew out his watch and compared it with the big dial above him, bought an evening paper from a boy, and turned up towards Langham Place. A queer chap altogether, thought Styler, as he carefully hung in the rear—and doubtless a queer chase to which they were all committed!

The three men who followed behind Styler were suddenly interrupted in their progress. To the detec-

tive, who went first, Smith and Hextall sauntering with apparent carelessness a few yards in the rear, there came up a man, something like himself in outward appearance, who drew him out of the traffic to the edge of the pavement and exchanged a few words with him. Within a minute the detective turned to look for his companions, and sharply beckoned Hextall and Smith to approach. Smith saw at once that something had happened, and hastened up.

"A colleague of mine," said the detective, indicating the new-comer. "He's just told me, gentlemen, that Miss Tress may be arrested any time—to-night, very likely. In that case——"

"In that case," interrupted Smith, seizing the situation and speaking with emphatic decision, "you, Hextall, must return to Tress's flat at once! Go—instantly! You must be on the spot. And look here," he continued, turning to the detective, and at the same time casting an anxious glance on the receding Styler, "you go with Dr. Hextall—do! If your people should turn up there, at the Tress's flat, tell them there's no information—try to get them to——"

"I'll go, Mr. Smith, but if they turn up there at all to-night, I shan't be able to do much, if anything," said the detective. "You know——"

"I know—I know!" broke in Smith, pushing them both towards a taxi-cab, to the driver of which he had vigorously signalled. "But go—at once! Do what you can. I must follow my clerk. Don't lose a minute, Hextall," he added as they entered the cab. "If that girl is alone, as she may be, she'll be frightened

to death. And look here—if the worst should happen, get them to let Nurse Palliser accompany her. She's still at the flat, isn't she?—and you, too—tell 'em she's not strong enough to go alone. Understand?"

Hextall nodded gloomily, and Smith gave the driver the address of Tress's flat and waved him off. As the cab moved away he turned in pursuit of Styler and encountered the two Greeks. Demetriadi pointed a finger.

"Gone round there, eh?" he said with a sly wink. "That man and your man. Good! We follow them—yes?"

"Don't!" urged Smith. "If you two want to help us, don't! If there are too many of us we shall spoil everything. My clerk's competent to do all the shadowing that's needed. If you really want to help, go back to that café—have another drink, another smoke and come round to Hextall's again later in the evening."

Demetriadi looked disappointed for the minute, but his face suddenly cleared and he drew his companion back.

"Right-oh!" he said. "We do what you think better—all right, we come see you at the doctor's—eh?—some time. Good luck!"

Smith hurried round the corner into Upper Regent Street. The darkness had fallen on the spring night, and even in that brilliantly-lighted thoroughfare there were patches of shade. Out of one of those in front he saw Styler emerge and go slowly onward.

And after Styler he too went, slowly, warily. He knew Styler well enough to know that nothing short of a cataclysm would make him lose sight of the man he was following.

The man sauntered along the broad pavement, carelessly staring about him until he came to Margaret Street. There he turned inward, crossing the street, and strolling on at the same leisurely pace until he came to a house in close proximity to All Saints' Church. He entered the door of that house. Styler, watching him narrowly from the opposite side of the street, saw him cross a dimly-lighted lobby within, and go up the stairs at the rear. A minute later a light was turned high in a second-floor window, and a blind was pulled down. Then the shadow of a tall man crossed the light and the blind.

Styler made a circuitous detour around the end of the street before he approached that open doorway. There was no one about as he entered it; the street, indeed, was comparatively deserted just then. But at a little distance he saw Smith's stout and stumpy figure, and as soon as he had been within the shadowy lobby and out of it—a proceeding which was over within ten seconds—he went towards his master and drew him into the shadow of a projecting porch.

"He's in there," whispered Styler, indicating the light in the window of the upstairs room. "That's evidently a house now let out in offices. I've had a look at the names on the board in the hall.

Second-floor front—Francis Milhirst, Private Inquiry Agent.”

Smith started and stared at his clerk.

“Private inquiry agent, eh?” he muttered. “Um—in other and plainer words, private detective. If that’s the man, Styler——”

“That’s the man the Greek pointed out, anyhow,” said Styler. “I saw him go up, I saw him turn up his gas, I saw his shadow on the blind. And there is no other second-floor front—so I reckon that’s Francis Milhirst—whoever he may be.”

“If he’s a private inquiry agent,” said Smith, doubtfully, “it looks——”

Styler suddenly drew his master further back into the shadow of the doorway in which they were standing.

“Keep back!” he whispered. “Turn towards the door!”

Smith mechanically obeyed these sharp orders as a motor-car sped by, slackened speed, and drew up near the door of the house which Styler had just left. Presently the grip which Styler had laid on his arm relaxed; he felt the clerk turning him round.

“Look!” muttered Styler. “See them?”

Smith cautiously glanced round the edge of the doorway. He saw three men get out of the motor-car, cross the pavement, and enter the house into which Styler had tracked the tall man. But his eyesight was not too good at night, and he shook his head.

"I saw three figures," he remarked regretfully, "but I couldn't make out any more. Did you see—anybody you know?"

Styler made no reply for a moment. He was watching the motor-car. The liveried chauffeur had got down to open the door for the men who had just gone into the house—now he closed it with a bang, remounted his box, and moved off to the corner of Wells Street. Styler drew his master out to the pavement again.

"I saw two that I know, anyhow!" he exclaimed. "This is getting a bit thick, sir! Yes, two—Esmondhaugh, for one. And for the other—Pegge! Pegge—Philcox! What on earth does it mean! Those two—going in there—together?"

"But there was a third," said Smith.

"Youngish, swell-looking chap," answered Styler. "I don't know him. Oh, yes!—I saw all of 'em. I just caught sight of them in the nick of time—that gas-lamp shone full on them. Esmondhaugh and Pegge—in there with that man! Good Lord!—there's something behind and beneath all this that we haven't reckoned on. Private inquiry agent, eh?" he continued, as if thinking aloud. "Seen with Miss Brock—now in consultation with Major Esmondhaugh—and with old Pegge—um!"

"We don't know that they've gone to see this man," remarked Smith. "There are other places of business in that building, of course."

"Bottom floor a shop—first, insurance office—second, Milhirst's—third, modes and robes, Madame Somebody-or-other. They haven't gone in there to buy modes, nor to shop, nor to do insurance business, at this hour of the evening," replied Styler. "Besides—look there!"

He and Smith had moved across the street in talking, and Styler now jerked a thumb at the lighted window. A tall figure, crowned by a Homburg hat, was clearly defined upon the blind.

"That's Major Esmondhaugh," affirmed the clerk. "I know him by his hat. They're consulting about something, of course. I'd give half of what I'll ever be worth to know what it is—metaphorically speaking! All this follows on to that talk between Esmondhaugh, Mrs. Renton, and old Pegge the other night, at Pegge's bungalow. But how does this inquiry agent come in? What's he been doing? Have they been employing him?"

"You've probably hit the nail on the head there, my friend!" remarked Smith, with a dry laugh. "I should say that's the real conjecture. And in that case——"

"In any case, we've got to watch them," broke in Styler. He looked anxiously round him, up and down the street. "Where's Doctor Hextall and the man from the Yard, sir?"

Smith briefly explained matters, and Styler made no comment nor showed special interest; it was plain

that all his thoughts and energies were centered on the lighted window.

"All the same," he said suddenly, "if Miss Tress is in immediate danger, all the more reason why we shouldn't lose sight of this lot, sir."

"I don't mean us to lose sight of them," answered Smith. "Especially as it's plain that Major Esmond-haugh and Septimus Philcox are in league about something. They evidently don't expect to be long, Styler—that car's waiting."

Styler glanced towards the car—and as he looked the driver turned it round and moved back along the street until he came in front of the house in which the light burned. There he pulled up, and Styler motioned to Smith and began to stroll away.

"We needn't let that chauffeur see us, sir," he said. "We'd better separate. You keep an eye on the Regent Street end of this street, and I'll dodge back after a while and watch this car—they're sure to come out to it sooner or later."

"Better plan than that," answered Smith. "I'll go to the end of the street and find a taxi-cab and have it in readiness to follow. For they'll go away in that car, Styler, and we must be after them."

"But—the man!" said Styler. "The man I followed—Milhirst, if that's his name. We're after him."

"In my opinion," responded Smith, "you'll find that he'll go with them. If he doesn't—then we shall know what to do. But I think he will go—and I've a pretty good notion where they'll go to! So you

keep an eye on things there, Styler, while I get a taxi and place it in readiness. If they set out, you run along the top side of the street there, and you'll find me at the corner."

The clerk nodded, and presently turning, walked back along Margaret Street in the rôle of an unconcerned stroller. He appeared to be watching nothing and to see nothing, but he had an eye for the lighted window and the motor-car at the door below. Now and then a shadow crossed the blind of that window; more than once Styler recognized its shape. In that room, without a doubt, were the three oddly-assorted men who had come to visit the mysterious fourth. And down on the pavement the chauffeur read a newspaper by the light of his lamps and waited unconcernedly.

Suddenly the light in the second-floor went out. Styler, on the other side of the street, shrank into the nearest shadow and watched. Presently he saw the men coming down the stairs into the dimly-lighted lobby; then the swing doors were pushed open, and they emerged. And Styler became all eyes and counted. One—two—three—four! All there—and all entered the motor-car.

It was very quiet in that street just then; the slamming of the door of the car sounded like an explosion. And Styler, sharp of ear as of eye, caught clearly the order given to the chauffeur by a high-pitched, authoritative voice.

"Wilson—drive straight down to New Scotland Yard!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THE KNOCK AT THE DOOR

HEXTALL, driving off with the detective, felt as if everything was lost. He had already recognized the force of the evidence which could be brought against Paquita; he knew how invincibly stupid juries—and even the best-intentioned judges—can be; in any case, he foresaw trouble, scandal, sore tribulations, for all of them. Paquita arrested—Paquita haled before a magistrate—Paquita remanded to some horrible detention prison—Paquita made to stand her trial, in the presence of fashionable female ghouls and vampires—ugh, it was too awful to think of! In spite of himself he groaned aloud. The next instant he turned sharply and indignantly on his companion. For the detective laughed—laughed quietly, but unmistakably.

“All right, Dr. Hextall!” he said. “You’ll excuse me—my own thoughts. Now, sir, we’ve got away from that over-officious friend of yours, so if you’ll stop the cab, we’ll get out and have a word or two of quiet talk. Mr. Smith’s a bit—hasty.”

Hextall, greatly surprised at this sudden development, checked the driver as the cab came to the corner of Harley Street, pressed a coin into his hand

as they got out, and turned impatiently to the detective.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. "How—hasty?"

"I mean this," answered the detective quietly. "There's no need for all this fuss. Mr. Smith doesn't understand these things as I do, and he hustled us into that cab and off and away before he'd let me speak. In any case, if our people do decide to arrest Miss Tress to-night, it won't be for another hour or two—I know. The fact of the case is—I've got the warrant in my pocket!"

"You?" muttered Hextall. "You've got—that?"

"I've had it since this morning," replied the detective. "And—so there you are! And before I do anything with it, I'm going back to headquarters to tell them of what I've learnt to-night. Something is going to come of that, doctor—sure! You saw me speak to a man when we were outside that Café Noir? Yes—well, that was one of my men, and he's now keeping an eye on the chap that the Greek young gentleman told us about—Mr. Smith and his clerk may be all very well, but I'd like to make sure. So there's a double watch on that stranger, and wherever he goes to-night he'll be safely shadowed. And as I say, before I do anything, I'm going down to the Yard. And so——"

He paused and looked at Hextall with a smile which came very close to the character of a wink. And Hextall stared—and wondered.

"You see," the detective presently went on, "I, personally, don't believe in Miss Tress's guilt—not I! It's all bosh—in spite of what the footman and the valet have told. But then I'm only an instrument. Still, as I said before, the warrant's been entrusted to me, to use at my discretion—the other man who spoke to me just now didn't know that, nor all that I do—and I'm not going to execute it until I've told 'em down yonder about this new development. And so——"

Again he looked at Hextall slyly, and Hextall suddenly flushed with a new hope.

"You mean—you mean——" he exclaimed hurriedly. "You mean——"

"I mean," answered the detective, "that if I were in your shoes, knowing what you know now, I should just get Miss Tress quietly away somewhere for thirty-six or even twenty-four hours—by the end of that time, and maybe long before, I think my warrant will be so much waste paper. Now look here, doctor—I've treated you like a gentleman—you treat me the same. Is there anywhere—any friend of yours—where you could just take Miss Tress so that if we did call to-night or to-morrow she wouldn't be at home, and her servants, of course, wouldn't know where she'd gone?"

"Yes!" replied Hextall. "There is."

"And you'll give me your word of honour that if I should have to ask for her you'll produce her?"

said the detective. "I'm putting myself in your hands, you know."

"Yes!" again answered Hextall. He impulsively held out a hand, and his companion laughed quietly as he shook it.

"All right, doctor," he said. "Now then—you take my advice. Don't say a word of the real truth to Miss Tress or her brother, but use your own way of getting her out of their flat—at once. You'll manage it all right. Make any excuse you can think of—but get her away. And then—why, we'll just hope that she can come back in safety. Now I'm off about my business—you go and do yours."

He turned away with a reassuring nod, and Hextall, relieved of immediate anxiety and marvelling greatly at this exhibition of professional diplomacy, hurried off to the flat in Queen Anne Street. He had partly made up his mind as to what he would do while he listened to the detective. He had a sister living in Hampstead upon whom he could rely; to her care he would entrust Paquita, for, at any rate, the thirty-six or twenty-four hours during which there was hope of some great result. All he had got to do was to get Paquita away—if it became necessary he would have to tell Darrell the plain truth; as for Paquita herself, he felt sure that she would do whatever he asked of her.

But the getting away would have to be sure and secret; he began to contrive and to plan as he walked towards the flat. Fortunately, the defection of Wal-

ters and of Fowler had left the Tress domestic establishment depleted—there were now no men-servants in the place. But there were two or three women servants there, and it might be awkward to get Paquita out and away without their knowledge. Moreover, there was Nurse Palliser, who was still in attendance upon Paquita, convalescent though Paquita was. The other nurse had been dispensed with on the return of the Tress's from Lynne Court; Nurse Palliser could have been dispensed with, too, but Hextall had retained her services at Smith's special request. She would be in the way, now. But Hextall was not without resource of mind or fertility of invention, and by the time he had knocked at the front door of the flat he knew how to rid himself of Nurse Palliser.

"Mr. Tress in?" he asked of the parlourmaid who admitted him. "Shall I find him in the study?"

"Mr. Tress is out, sir," replied the girl. "He went out about an hour ago. I heard him say he was going to the club, sir."

Hextall turned from the study door to that of the drawing-room.

"Miss Tress is in, of course?" he said. "In here?"

The parlourmaid hesitated.

"I believe Miss Tress has gone to bed, sir," she answered. "She's gone to her room, I know. The nurse is with her."

"Oh!" said Hextall. "Well, ask Nurse Palliser to come to me in the study, will you?"

The girl disappeared down a corridor, and Hextall walked into the study and turned up the light of the lamp which burned on a centre table. For an instant he had a vision of Paquita summoned into that room to meet the searching glances of strange men and to hear that she was charged with——

“That’s got to be stopped, somehow!” he muttered with a shudder. “That mustn’t be!”

A light footstep in the doorway heralded the entrance of Nurse Palliser, cool, collected. She looked at him in evident surprise.

“Miss Tress was just going to bed, Dr. Hextall,” she said. “It’s the time you fixed—ten o’clock.”

“I know—I know,” answered Hextall, glancing at a clock on the mantel-piece. “But I particularly wish to see her. Just ask her to come to me for a moment. And will you come back with her, nurse?—I want you to do something for me.”

When Nurse Palliser had left the room Hextall glanced at his reflection in the glass. He was feeling nervous and unstrung, and he saw with great distaste that he looked pale and anxious.

“Pull yourself together, you ass!” he muttered. “Now’s the time——”

He turned suddenly to see Paquita coming in, with Nurse Palliser’s tall figure behind her. And to his great satisfaction he saw that Paquita was still fully attired, and not in the dressing-gown in which he had feared to find her. That was good—now there would be no difficulty—he would hurry her into a

wrap, get her out of the flat, round the nearest corner, and away. But first—Nurse Palliser.

"A minute," he said, nodding cheerfully at Paquita, as she came in. "I just want to speak to your nurse." And he passed Paquita and motioned Nurse Palliser back into the hall. "Look here, nurse," he said, speaking as unconcerned as he could; "I want you to do something for me. You know my house—round the corner, in Wimpole Street? Will you go there and ask my parlourmaid to show you into the little room that opens out of my dressing-room? You'll see in the left-hand recess by the fireplace a small safe let into the wall. Here's the key of it. Inside the safe, in the right-hand drawer, you'll see a small case, with a brass plate bearing my initials on it—bring it to me. If it shouldn't be there, just hunt about the safe for it."

Nurse Palliser took the key without remark, and immediately turned to the door of the hall.

"Your number is—what, Dr. Hextall?" she asked.

"Sixty-three A," answered Hextall, still affecting unconcern. "There's the plate on the door. Allow me."

He opened the door of the flat for her, stood aside to let her pass out—closed it on her. Then he drew a deep breath and strode straight back to the study. So far, things were going well—the small case which he had sent Nurse Palliser to fetch was at that very moment in his overcoat pocket; therefore, she would spend some time hunting for it. She would, at any

rate, be away from the flat for a quarter of an hour, and in that time——

Paquita stared at him with surprised and questioning eyes as he returned to the room and closed the door behind him.

“Something is the matter!” she said. “I see it—saw it as soon as I came to you. What——”

Hextall went straight up to her and took both her hands.

“Listen!” he said. “This isn’t the time for talking—we’ve got to act. Something has happened—I’ll tell you what some other time. Just now I want you to do exactly what I ask. Will you?”

He was still holding Paquita’s hands, and in his eagerness and excitement he unconsciously drew her towards him, and Paquita began to tremble and shrink as she came nearer.

“Yes!” she whispered. “Of course. But—what?”

“I want you—instantly, mind!—to put on a cloak—something warm—and to come out with me,” he answered. “Never mind what it is—anything that will wrap you up. The thing is—quickness! Run, now, and get something.”

He released her hands and almost pushed her to the door. And at the door Paquita turned with a sudden thought of alarm.

“Darrell?” she exclaimed. “There’s nothing wrong about Darrell?”

"Nothing!" answered Hextall, almost stamping in his impatience. "There's nothing wrong in that way at all. Only do what I ask—and be quick!"

He heard her run across the hall and down the corridor to her room; he heard the door of her room close behind her. Then the necessary minutes began to seem like hours. He crossed over to the window, drew a blind, looked out on the street. At the corner he saw a little group of men, standing near a lamp, evidently talking earnestly. For an instant his heart leapt in fear; then he remembered the friendly detective's last words.

"He said—'not for an hour or two!'" muttered Hextall. "An hour or two! And he meant it—I'll swear he meant it!"

A light footstep sounded in the hall, and he sprang hastily across the room. Paquita, cloaked and expectant, stood waiting—and smiling.

"Come!" whispered Hextall, and moved to the door.

But as he laid his hand on the latch and lifted it, a knock, sharp, imperative, sounded on the outer panel. He opened the door quickly, glanced through an inch of opening, and shrank back with a stifled groan of despair. On the landing outside the flat were men whose very appearance betokened their calling.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE INNER ROOM

WHEN the motor-car and its curiously-assorted contents had swept past him and turned southward out of Margaret Street, Styler walked leisurely along the pavement until he encountered Smith. Smith, who had already seen the car, was almost dancing with impatience. He motioned energetically towards Styler with one hand, and with the other pointed to a taxi-cab which stood waiting against the curb in Regent Street.

"Come on, come on!" he exclaimed, as Styler approached. "We're going to miss them!"

"No need for hurry, sir," answered Styler, imperturbably. "I know where they've gone."

"Where?" demanded Smith. "Where?"

"New Scotland Yard. I heard that swell-looking chap give orders to the chauffeur. They've all gone—Esmondhaugh, Pegge, the young swell, and the man we followed—Milhirst, as I take his name to be. And I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Smith," continued Styler, with a sudden burst of gloomy confidence, "in my opinion, we're done!"

"Done?" exclaimed Smith. "How? What do you mean?"

“Done!” replied Styler, more gloomily than ever. “Brown! Our pitch is queered. The ground’s cut from under our feet. We’re beaten—by a short head. And by a dark horse, too! That’s what I think.”

Smith glanced anxiously at the waiting cab and then at his clerk.

“If you’d speak plain English I should know what you’re talking about,” he said testily. “What on earth do you mean, man?”

“What I say—only my language is a bit—what do you call it—metaphorical,” answered Styler. “I mean that somebody—this Milhirst man, I should think—is going to cut in before us. What’s it all mean—this meeting of Major Esmondhaugh, and old Pegge-Philcox, and this other chap whom we don’t know, at the office of a private inquiry agent? And then all of ’em off to the headquarters of the police? Ah—he’s a deep one, is that Major—he’s done me a treat! I thought he gave me a queer look when I found him with Mrs. Renton the other night—oh, yes! It’s this way, Mr. Smith—somebody’s been playing the mole game—working underground. I ain’t a betting man,” concluded Styler, solemnly, “but if I were I’d lay all my savings to Aldgate Pump that these chaps have found out the truth about those murders and have gone to the Yard to tell! And we are—done!”

Smith made no answer. It was beginning to dawn upon him that there was a good deal in what his

clerk had said—certainly these movements were extraordinary. He walked about the corner of the street a moment or two in deep thought.

“Here!” he suddenly exclaimed. “We know a man down there who’ll tell us what’s going on. Come along, Styler, we’ll follow them.”

He bundled Styler into the cab, told the driver to pull up in Whitehall, and groaned as he sank into a corner and slammed the door.

“Too bad if we’re disappointed of our game at the end, Styler,” he said. “But what can these people know?”

“How does anybody know what we know?” growled Styler. “We don’t know what the police know. We don’t know what this Milhirst knows—nor what Esmondhaugh and Pegge know. They’ve been playing their game—we’ve been playing ours. But there’s one thing I’ve been certain of ever since I went into that Café Noir.”

“What?” asked Smith.

“That that Milhirst chap isn’t any guilty party,” said Styler, with conviction. “I don’t care what connexion he had with Kesteven, nor how much he was seen with the little governess. No, sir—that chap isn’t a man who’s followed—he’s following. No guilty man would have walked out of that café the way he did nor sauntered to his office as he did. I’m a bit of a psychologist, though people mayn’t think it, and I can read some folks pretty quick!”

While Smith was meditating over this remark the taxi-cab pulled up in Whitehall and he and Styler getting out walked rapidly in the direction of New Scotland Yard. But as they neared the entrance to that conglomeration of buildings another taxi-cab came out, and as it passed them, Styler's sharp eyes caught and searched the faces of the occupants.

"That's that chap Milhirst and a couple of detectives!" he exclaimed. "I know both the detectives by sight, but I don't know their names. Well, they're off somewhere, anyway!"

"For anything we know," remarked Smith, "that chap may have just been arrested."

"No, sir!" affirmed Styler, confidently. "Nothing of the sort—if anything, the three of 'em are on their way to make an arrest. And—here's the Major and the others."

They had turned a corner as Styler spoke, and there, a short distance away, standing at a door in company with two or three men of official appearance, they saw Major Esmondhaugh, Samuel Pegge, and the younger man who had accompanied the other two to the office in Margaret Street. The private motor-car which had been so much in evidence that evening was drawn up at the kerb; behind it were two or three taxi-cabs. And as Smith and Styler, passing at the corner, watched, the man whom Styler had characterized as a swell entered the private car alone, and was driven off in one direction, while Mr. Pegge, simultaneously entering a taxi-cab by himself, disappeared in another. A moment later, Major Esmondhaugh,

exchanging a nod and a word of farewell with the group at the door, turned away, and swinging his stick, strode towards Whitehall and the watchful couple.

"Speak to him, Styler," whispered Smith. "He'll remember you. Find something out!"

Styler strode out of the patch of shadow in which he and Smith had lurked and intercepted the approaching figure.

"Beg your pardon, Major," he said apologetically. "You remember me, sir—the other night, at The Warren, you know, sir?"

Major Esmondhaugh, who was evidently deep in thought and reflection, paused, stared, fixed his monocle in his right eye, and bent his tall figure to contemplate that of his inquirer. He glanced from Styler to Smith—and he smiled, oddly and enigmatically.

"Ah—er—ah!" he said. "Just so. Mr.—er—Styler, I think? Oh, yes, I remember you perfectly. And this is, no doubt, Dr. Hextall's friend—Mr. Smith?"

Smith drew nearer, determined to get some satisfaction out of an awkward situation.

"You must excuse us for interrupting you, Major Esmondhaugh," he said. "The fact is—I dare say you know that we are engaged on Mr. Tress's behalf in trying to get at the bottom of these murders. And——"

Major Esmondhaugh interrupted him with a wave of the hand.

"Yes, yes, so I think I have understood, Mr. Smith," he said. "But really, I—I can't tell you anything, you know. I—the fact is, everything is in the hands of these people—police officials, don't you know?—in here, eh? I think—yes, if you perhaps look in to-morrow morning's newspapers, you know, you will find—eh?"

He was showing signs of a desire to go on his way, as he spoke, and Smith, seeing that he did not wish to be communicative, drew back with a bow. But Styler was not to be so easily put off.

"Can't you tell us anything, Major?" he asked earnestly. "We've taken an awful lot of trouble, and we've followed up a big clue to-night, and we know that you know more than we do, and——"

"Well, really, Mr. Styler," answered Major Esmondhaugh, not unkindly. "I—really, I wish I could, you know, but then, you know, I ought not to, don't you know. Eh? I—professional secrecy, you know, eh? But I tell you what," he exclaimed suddenly, with the joy of a not very brilliant man who receives unusual inspiration, "I tell you what, you know—I think that if—yes!—if you call on your friend Dr. Hextall, presently, you'll hear something—yes, something pretty, ah, yes, pretty important, you know! Sorry I mustn't stop, Mr. Smith—got an awfully pressing engagement, and I'm late for it already."

He strode hurriedly away with a nod and a smile, and Smith and Styler looked at each other. Then they, too, moved off and went back into Whitehall.

"I shouldn't have said, from his manner, that he'd anything much to tell," remarked Smith. "What do you say, Styler?"

"I say—let us take that cab and drive to the doctor's, sir," answered Styler. "Major Esmondhaugh is not what I should call an imaginative sort of gentleman, and if he says we shall hear something at Hextall's we shall."

There was nothing to see outside Hextall's house once the two reached it; neither had there been anything to see in Queen Anne Street as they passed through. Styler had glanced up at the lighted windows of the Tress's flat and looked in at the general doorway on the street level—nothing unusual to be seen in doorways or windows. And there was nothing unusual in the bearing of Hextall's parlourmaid when she admitted them to the house.

"Dr. Hextall hasn't come back since he went out with you, sir," she said. "Will you come in and wait? I don't know what time he'll be in. Those foreign young gentlemen were here just now, but they've gone away again."

"Oh, we'll wait," answered Smith. "Dr. Hextall can't be long."

Well familiar with the house, Smith led the way into the dining-room. It was little more than an hour since they had all lately quitted it in consequence of Demetriadi's arrival and news, and the chairs which they had occupied still stood here and there exactly as they had left them. And one half of a folding door which communicated with a small inner room

was open, and within it, searching about shelves and bookcases with a lamp in her hand, was Nurse Palliser. Hearing them enter she looked into the larger room.

"Mr. Smith," she said. "I wish you and Mr. Styler would help me to find something. Dr. Hextall sent me across from Mr. Tress's to bring him a small case which he said was in that safe. But it isn't there, and now I'm seeking it; I believe he particularly wants it."

"Oh, Dr. Hextall's over there, is he?" asked Smith, as he stepped into the room. "Been there long?"

"He's over there with Miss Tress," answered Nurse Palliser. "He came in just as she was going to bed. I'm sure he wants this case for some special reason, and he said I should find it somewhere about if it wasn't where he said it was. Mr. Styler—would you mind looking if it's been put in that cabinet?"

Smith, looking idly about him and taking no particular interest in the search, suddenly heard a step in the hall; then he heard Hextall's voice.

With a glance at Styler he went out into the dining-room and closed the folding-door behind him. And as his hand pulled it into place, the door leading from the hall opened and Hextall, pale, dazed-looking, but evidently wound up to some curious pitch of energy, entered. Behind him, following quietly, were three men—one, the tall man of Margaret Street, the others the men who had driven away with him from New Scotland Yard.

Smith suddenly felt himself rooted to the carpet on which he stood. He stared open-mouthed at Hextall. And Hextall twice moistened his lips with the tip of his tongue before he managed to speak. Even then his voice was dry and harsh.

"The nurse!" he whispered. "Is she—here?"

Smith, more wonderstruck than ever, lifted a finger and pointed to the inner room. And Hextall nodded, glanced at the men behind him, and as if making up his mind to a great effort, suddenly threw back the door.

"Nurse!" he said, steadying his voice. "Will you come here, please?"

Nurse Palliser walked straight out of the room—and into the middle of the three men. And then Smith knew and understood and saw everything—and Styler, turning from the shelves of the cabinet, also saw and also understood.

The woman understood, too. And with the quickness of a startled snake her right hand shot round to the side pocket of her nursing gown. But the official eyes had been quick to see, and the official hands to act, and before Smith could move he heard a click, and saw the flash of something bright, and he knew that the Law had once more laid hands on—what?

Then for an instant Smith got an answer to that question, and saw incarnate deviltry and wickedness look out of a woman's bold and vengeful eyes. For Nurse Palliser straightened herself and laughed; and two men, at any rate, who heard that laugh, knew that they would dream of it, and would sweat with

fear in the dreaming—not once, but many a time in days to come.

“Damn you!” said Nurse Palliser, between her clenched teeth. “Damn one and all of you! But never mind—you can’t rob me of the satisfaction I got in killing them!”

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE UNRAVELLING

BEFORE Smith could recover from his surprise, the two detectives had hurried Nurse Palliser out of the room and the house, and it was not until he heard the closing of the outer door that he found his voice.

"Nurse Palliser!" he exclaimed. "One of my most trusted assistants! Charged with murder! Impossible!—there must be some gross mistake!"

He turned to Hextall, angry and resentful. But Hextall, who was still very pale and was nervously wiping his forehead, shook his head and pointed to the tall man, who had remained behind, and was regarding Smith thoughtfully.

"Ask—him!" said Hextall. "I'm—I'm as surprised as you are. And I'm—shaken. We—we'll have a drink."

He walked unsteadily to the sideboard, but only to lean against it when he got there, and he turned to Styler with a weak smile.

"Here, Styler!" he said. "You—come and get us something—brandy. My God!—I've had a shock."

"Shock!" exclaimed Smith. "I should think so." He turned sharply on the tall man. "So you know all about this, eh?" he said. "Well, can't you tell us? Do you really mean to say that Nurse Palliser

killed that man Kesteven—and Miss Brock? Impossible!”

The man sat down in the nearest chair and looked at Smith with a glance full of significance.

“Miss Brock,” he said, “was my sister. That woman did kill her—and she killed the man you call Kesteven, too. The proofs are clear enough—besides, you heard what she said.”

“God bless my soul!” muttered Smith. “Do you hear that, Styler? Aren’t you surprised?”

“Never surprised at anything, sir,” replied Styler, calmly busy with bottles and syphons. “I told you somebody was working underneath us. All the same, to be fair, I can’t say that I ever suspected that particular party. But,” he added, as he thrust a tumbler into Hextall’s hand, “after seeing the look in that party’s eyes when she owned up, I should say that she was capable of killing a few more people. And I reckon I know what her motive was in those two cases. Bit of revenge, eh, Mr. Milhirst, wasn’t it?” he concluded, glancing at the tall man. “Oh, you needn’t start because I know your name—we can do a bit of looking round, you know, as well as anybody.”

“I want to know all about it,” said Hextall, reviving under Styler’s care. “I know nothing—I—I thought you and the other men had come to Mr. Tress’s flat on—on quite another errand. I wish you’d tell us what the truth is. Have a drink and tell us.”

“It’s a long story and an intricate one, Dr. Hextall,” answered Milhirst. “And at present I can’t do

more than give you a mere outline of it—you'll hear more of it when that woman's tried. An associate of yours, I think you said, Mr. Smith, by the by?"

"An employée of mine," growled Smith. "And a trusted one!"

"All the same, I don't suppose you know much about her," replied Milhirst. "And I can't say that I know very much myself—but I know quite sufficient of her in connexion with recent events to ensure that she's safely hanged. Well—if I'm to tell you briefly what I know, I shall have to begin at what seems to be the beginning. And I shall have to bring in some names of people of position—the truth is, they can't be kept out. And the first name is that of the Countess of Oronsay."

Smith nudged Styler, who just then passed him on his way to hand Milhirst a glass.

"Lady Oronsay," continued Milhirst, "is the younger daughter of Sir Godfrey Esmondhaugh and sister of Major Esmondhaugh and of Mrs. Renton. She is a lady of—well, original and determined character—what they call a modern woman. A good many years ago—comparatively—she came to London to live her own life—her tastes were artistic, and she set up a studio of her own, and, incidently, she got into what was called a Bohemian set—a pretty nice lot, I gather! You've got to bear in mind that she was young—also, she was living under an assumed name—and perhaps she wasn't very particular. Anyway, she did a very foolish thing—she took a violent fancy to a man whom she met at that time, and she married

him at a City Church under her assumed name, not letting him know who she really was. The man married her under the name of Edward Charleston Legette—and within a very few weeks of the marriage he left her.

“Now, you must keep this man in mind—a good deal turns on him—he had other names, aliases, but we’ll stick to Legette. Legette turned up in France, where he entered into a partnership with Kesteven, Tickell, and myself. It was a legitimate partnership—its object was to exploit a certain highly-perfected system of gaming at Monte Carlo, at Homburg, and at Boulogne. We did well for a couple of years—then I took my share and retired to England and engaged in other pursuits—and latterly in the business I am now following. Of the others I saw little for some time—with the exception of Kesteven. Through me, Kesteven got to know my sister, whom you knew as Miss Brock, and unknown to me they were married. I’m sorry to say that Kesteven had a very bad influence over her, and he used her, more than once, as a willing tool in some of his schemes.

“Now, some six or seven years ago, Legette, who had remained in France, got into the clutches of the French police on a very bad charge of fraud and forgery—so bad that he was sentenced to penal servitude for life, and in due course sent to the French penal settlements at Cayenne, in French Guiana. He had more or less kept in touch with Kesteven, and, after his conviction, certain papers and documents of his came into Kesteven’s hands. Amongst them was the

certificate of the marriage to which I referred just now; also a memorandum of the circumstances. Kesteven, who always had an eye to the future, put these papers safely away for reference.

“Not so long after that, Kesteven himself got into trouble over here—so did Tickell. They disappeared for a while—to Dartmoor. And, incidentally, they both made the acquaintance while there of the old gentleman whom you know as Mr. Samuel Pegge, who is in reality Septimus Philcox.

“Kesteven had left a lot of documents with his wife—and she had a natural genius for ferreting things out. She gave herself up to finding out all she could about that marriage of Legette’s and the unknown lady. And she found out—keeping it all to herself, mind you!—some queer things. She found out that the Miss Maud Eleanor Rivers of the certificate was in reality Miss Maud Esmondhaugh, who had long since repented of her excursion into Bohemia and had gone back to her proper sphere. More than that, having waited seven years and heard nothing of Legette, she had married again—married Lord Oronsay, to whom, I may tell you, she made a clean breast of the whole affair. They had made some inquiries, and they had good reason to believe that Legette was really dead—anyway, they never identified him with the man Spencer Ellis, who was doing a life sentence at Cayenne. But Kesteven’s wife found all this out—what was more, she got into touch with people in British Guiana who were willing, for a heavy consideration, to arrange Ellis’s release.

“All this was ripe when Kesteven and Tickell came into the world again from Dartmoor. Almost at once Kesteven made the acquaintance of young Mr. Darrell Tress, and began to bleed him for all he was worth—but carefully. He introduced his wife into Mr. Tress’s house as Miss Brock, the governess. He, she, and Tickell were meanwhile carefully concocting a gigantic plan for blackmailing Lord Oronsay. And it was then that Kesteven made a mighty mistake. They wanted a certain sum of ready money—for reasons of his own, Kesteven didn’t want to get it from Tress. But, as I told you, Kesteven had made the acquaintance of Septimus Philcox, at Dartmoor, and he knew that Philcox could readily command capital. And meeting Philcox at Lynne, and believing him to be as big a scoundrel as himself and ready to enter into his own nefarious schemes, he was fool enough to tell Philcox of the plot, and to ask him to find the money in consideration of a big share in the proceeds. There he made his mistake—Philcox finessed with him, pumped him, and—told everything to Mrs. Renton, his neighbour, whom he knew to be Lady Oronsay’s sister.

“But just then events happened pretty quickly, and I must speak of them in the light of subsequent discoveries. Miss Tress met with an accident and came down to Lynne Court with two nurses in attendance. One of those nurses was Ann Palliser, a woman who had reason to cherish revengeful feelings against Kesteven, and had, in fact, been looking for him for years. The very night that she got down to Lynne

Kesteven came there, and she evidently witnessed a meeting between him and his wife—in the house. Later, when Kesteven went out into the grounds to show Tickell a near cut to the road which he, Tickell, was taking to Weymouth, to meet a certain agent in the Ellis-Legette business, she watched him, followed him, and shot him. Nobody ever seemed to suspect her—except Kesteven's wife. She did suspect her—and next day she ran away from Lynne to London, to see me, her brother, and get my help. Now, I——”

“A moment, if you please,” said Smith. “How came Miss Brock, or Mrs. Kesteven, to suspect Palliser?”

“I'll tell you,” replied Milhirst. “My sister, you must remember, had had her wits pretty well sharpened by Kesteven, and she was full of resource. She heard of Kesteven's murder at seven-thirty, when she rose. Ten minutes later, she saw Palliser leaving the house in the direction of the village. She had already sized up all sorts of probabilities, and indulged in a good many speculations, and she knew that Palliser was the only real stranger in the house. Palliser's room was next to hers—she went into it. And in a small handbag which she examined amongst other things, she found a photograph of Kesteven, taken some years previously, and some letters. And she also found some address cards of Palliser's, and she took one—a lucky thought!

“Now, you mayn't think that was much to go on, but my sister was full of—call it craft, if you like—

and it was enough for her. She left—quietly. Kesteven had handed over to her a lot of money the night before; she took that with her. Also, she had with her a key to Mrs. Tress's flat in Queen Anne Street, and as soon as she reached town she went there and secured that marriage certificate of which I spoke—it was hidden in an old suit of her husband's. Then she came to my office. Unfortunately, I was away in the North of England. She was greatly upset. She got my clerk to wire to me, begging me to return. Then she went and secured some former lodgings of hers. And then she did a thing which she had been meditating since morning. She knew that Mrs. Renton was in town, and she wrote and asked her to call, intending to tell her the whole story about the blackmailing plot; now that Kesteven was dead, she wished to have no more to do with it. But before she could do so, she got a wire from me—which she opened while Mrs. Renton was there—saying that I was returning there and then.

“So she put Mrs. Renton off, and when she had gone, she set off to meet me at King's Cross, and there she told me everything. It was of course, all news to me—the plot, I mean. But the first thing to do was to inquire into the apparent connexion between Palliser and Kesteven, and next day I got the help of the police, and we searched Palliser's rooms. And there we found plenty of documentary evidence to show that Palliser had ample reason for jealousy and revenge against Kesteven, whom she had known some

years before, and for whom, as I told you, she had been looking ever since.

“Now then, you see, the police were at work—and so was I. But there was more to do—and more resulted. That night I took my sister to see Lord Oronsay, at his house, to tell him all about the blackmailing plot—he had, of course, already heard through Mrs. Renton and Major Esmondhaugh what Philcox had revealed. It was I, of course, who drove with my sister from Laburnum Terrace to the corner of Upper Grosvenor Street; I let the police know that, long before the driver of the taxi-cab came forward—the police and I have been working at this all through. And after my sister and I left Lord Oronsay’s house we walked back, discussing matters, to Stanhope Gate. She wanted to walk across the Park to call at a friend’s house in Kensington High Street, before going home to Laburnum Terrace. I wanted her to ride, but she would walk. I had an appointment with a detective, and after going a little way into the Park with her, I left her. She went off along the broad path—a well-lighted one, remember—which cuts across towards Kensington. Next morning, I heard that she had been found stabbed to death.”

Milhirst paused, and for the first time took a drink from the glass which Styler had handed him. The three men, curiously watching him, saw that he was evidently a man of stern determination, and two of them felt a keen professional interest as they saw a certain glitter steal into his eyes, when he resumed his story.

“Stabbed to death!” he repeated, thoughtfully. “I had never seen much of my sister, gentlemen, and I can’t truthfully say that we had any great affection for each other, but when they fetched me to see her I vowed that I’d never rest until I’d seen the black flag run up for her murderess! I say murderess because I knew, of course, that she’d been killed by that she-devil who’d already killed her husband. But the thing was to prove it. And now I’ll have to put before you a bit of circumstantial evidence, the last items of which the detectives and I have only got together to-day.

“In the early evening of the day on which my sister was murdered, Mr. and Miss Tress, the nurses, and some of their servants came from Lynne Court to the flat in Queen Anne Street. They arrived a little before seven o’ clock. At eight o’clock Palliser left the flat to visit her own rooms for a couple of hours. Those rooms are, as Mr. Smith is probably aware, at Trevor Square, Knightsbridge. Palliser, according to her landlady, reached them at half-past eight; she left them, on the same testimony, at five minutes to ten. And she remarked to her landlady, as she left, that she was going to walk back to Queen Anne Street across the Park. Now, if you look at a map, you will see that the path which she would follow northward is precisely the path which my sister would take southward. They met!—and we have not the slightest doubt that Palliser stabbed my sister and drew the body to where it was found next morning beneath a shrubbery near the path. Neither have we the least

doubt that the weapon she used was a surgical knife which, as Dr. Hextall can tell you, we found half an hour ago in her handbag at Mr. Tress's flat."

Milhirst rose and began to button his overcoat. He looked at Smith and Smith looked at him. Then Smith put his hand in his pocket and drew out the cablegram from Georgetown.

"There's something that may interest you and your clients, Mr. Milhirst," he remarked. "You're welcome to it—I've done with this case!"

Milhirst picked up the message and read it attentively. Then he laid it down again.

"Much obliged to you, Mr. Smith," he said. "But we've already aware of this—we received this news from the French authorities—officially—two days ago. Thank you all the same—on behalf of the parties concerned."

"Oh, all right, all right!" said Smith, resignedly. "Glad you've been successful in your enterprises, anyway." He waited until Milhirst had left, and then he looked meditatively at Hextall and at Styler. "I'm wondering," he muttered, "how long it would have taken Styler and myself to work round to that grim conclusion? I—what's the matter, Hextall?"

"Sorry to interrupt you, old chap," said Hextall, who was obviously on pins and needles. "But I—I must go out. I—the fact is, you see, Miss Tress is waiting for me."

Then Smith and Styler went away without another word, and Hextall, parting from them on his doorstep, raced breathlessly back to the flat, and to Paquita.

And to this day Paquita has never succeeded in making her medical attendant—promoted on that occasion to a higher place in her regard and affections—explain how it was that, without remark, preface, or verbal reason, he clasped her to his breast and kept her there as if he were silently thanking the gods that nothing could ever snatch her from him.

THE END

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